

A Frozen Re:Start

Story: A Frozen Re:Start

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Summary: Spoilers through the end of LN 14. Having read through arc IV is recommended; if you are anime only waiting for the second half of the second season is advised. Satella's personality gains a moment of dominance over the Witch of Envy, and as a result an 11 year old Subaru is summoned in the Ellior Forest with a similarly young Emilia.

***Chapter 1*: Chapter 1**

Chapter 1: The Boy Who Fell From the Sky

The sound of a gentle breeze, as it threw powdery snow about, covered up the crunches of a young girl's footsteps as she wondered about. Loosely wrapped in a coat, she meandered about, carrying a weathered piece of parchment in her hands. The trees above her swayed gently as she surveyed the thicket of thorny bushes surrounding her. To call them bushes was perhaps a bit too generous, the winter around them having left them as mere woody shrubbery with evergreen needles.

"Should I call this the Thorny Thicket?" A bell like voice rang out, having taken a break from some off key humming.

Between her porcelain skin and long silver hair her visage would have barely stood out from the snow covered landscape around her were it not for her vibrant, blue eyes, perhaps bordering on purple. Said eyes began to widen ever so slightly as she heard a sudden screaming start from above her. The branches of a tree to her left rustled as they deposited a dark haired child, face first, into the thorny shrubbery to her left. His grunts of pain were muffled as all the snow knocked loose from the branches piled on top of him.

"Are you ok?" She yelled as she broke into a panicked rush to check on him.

The only answer she got was a muffled groan as she hurriedly brushed the snow off of his body. As she rolled him over his face was a mess of blood and cuts, and looked certain to bruise soon enough. She quickly put her hands on his chest and began focusing on using the limited healing magic she was capable of; a soft green glow cast outwards over him and his bleeding quickly stopped. As she worked her face took on a twist of concern and diligence, made quite adorable by the stark contrast with her age and stature.

His pained breathing calming down he looked up, blushed, and said the first thing that came to his mind.

"Am I dead?" He asked.

Taken aback she could only shout back, "Why would you even joke about that?"

"It's not really a joke. I was going to the park, randomly appeared here, fell from the sky, and now I've got an angel trying to help me." He summarized his arrival.

"Angel?" She muttered, her face a cross between confused and blushing.

"I mean I have no idea what's going on, and out of nowhere some super-pretty girl starts helping me. What am I supposed to think?" He asked, clear admiration on his face.

"I'm just Emilia..." She trailed off, her face dumbfounded.

"Well thanks a ton Emilia. I don't know how you did it but I certainly feel a lot less like I fell out of the sky than I did a minute ago." He flashed her a wide grin, a gap from a few missing baby teeth clearly visible.

"It's just some basic healing magic; I'm not even really that good at it, surely you've seen it before?" Emilia mumbled shyly.

"Magic? Are you telling me magic's real here?" The boy's face lit up with excitement.

"Are you telling me you've never seen magic before? That's reaaally weird." She drew out the vowel in "really" as her face expressed her growing bewilderment.

"Where am I anyway?" He broached the all too obvious question.

"You're in the part of the Ellior Forest that I've named the Thorny Thicket." Her expression seemed caught between excited and wary at this point.

"As much as I want to laugh about the Thorny Thicket part, the fact that I'll be pulling thorns out for days kinda makes me agree now. Now what part of Japan is this forest in?" As he poked a bit of fun at her naming sense Emilia's cheeks puffed out in an adorable pout, which suddenly deflated in confusion.

"I've never heard of a place called Japan." Emilia brought her right index finger up to her lip and tilted her head ever so slightly to the side.

A sinking feeling in his gut he asked, "Then what country are we in?"

"Lugnica." And with one word from her, his thoughts halted.

His face went blank and his eyes glazed over. A painful clench of his stomach brought a burning sensation up his throat. He balled his hands together tightly, and with the force of his will swallowed and quieted his stomach. Shaking his head he pulled himself together. Right as he did so he noticed Emilia casting a concerned gaze his way.

"Emilia, this might sound a bit crazy. I kind of feel like I've been transported to another world." He uttered dazedly as his teeth began to chatter ever so slightly.

The boy who had fallen from the sky was after all dressed in nothing but a track suit and training pants. With the adrenaline rush from literally falling out of the sky wearing off, the chill of being buried in snow in the frigid Elior forest began to kick in. As the first shivers began to wrack his body, Emilia leaned in closely concernedly checking him over. As he averted his gaze, face alight with a blush, Emilia pulled back having heard the hastening clatter of his teeth.

"I'm not sure about being from another world, but magic definitely teleported you up above the trees. Why don't you follow me to my house and warm up? Maybe Puck will be able to help figure out what's going on." Emilia offered, reaching out with her hand to help pull her new acquaintance up. A sincere smile crossed her face that was quickly marred by nervousness.

"If it's not a problem that'd really help me out. Are you sure, though?" He took hold of her hand, and noticed her nervousness.

"It's no problem as long as you don't mind being around me," Emilia's voice was small and quiet, her face tense as if she expected to be yelled at or physically struck.

"I think it should be the other way around. You're the one taking me into your home without knowing me at all." The boy gestured to himself with his thumb and struck a goofy pose.

"No, it's just people seem to be scared or upset when they see me..." Emilia trailed off, her voice still feeble, but her expression slightly looser after his antics.

"They must be idiots then. I mean you're frighteningly cute, but why would anyone be afraid of someone as nice as you?" At his frank exclamation Emilia couldn't help but blush as she smiled faintly,

"You're embarrassing me but thanks...wait have I even gotten your name yet?" She asked.

"I'm Natsuki Subaru, hopelessly lost and pleased to me you!" Subaru angled his body while lifting one arm straight up towards the sky.

Emilia, after a short but valiant struggle, burst out into uncontrollable giggles. In a matter of seconds she was gasping for air as tears streamed from her eyes. As she caught her breath Subaru glimpsed her smile for the first time since his crash landing.

"Honestly Subaru, you're such a goofball." Emilia squeezed out between breaths.

"But it got you to smile and laugh right? Someone like you looking all sad like that should be a crime!" Subaru declared in a mixture of false bravado and sincere belief.

As Subaru's shivering began to pick up, Emilia brought their small talk to an end.

"Follow me and let's get you warmed up. Thankfully it's not too far." Having said her piece she led the way, a cheerful pep to her step. If it weren't for the steady crunching of snow beneath her feet Subaru would have sworn she were skipping. A pleasant change from how hesitant she had been just a few minutes ago.

Emilia sensing her chance, attempted the conversation she'd been dreaming of having with someone for months, "So um, nice weather we're hav...", before shying away. After all for poor Subaru who was currently freezing to death, it certainly wouldn't seem like nice weather.

Subaru having always felt a bit awkward himself took pity on her attempt and started trying to think of a conversation starter. He took great care in thinking about it, after all, no one was more acquainted with the taste of their own foot than Natsuki Subaru. As the awkward silence drug on, he was struck by an idea.

"So, you mentioned someone named Puck earlier. Could you tell me a bit about him?" Subaru asked.

"Puck? He's a spirit that looks after me, he likes to take the form of a cat. He's pretty much my only friend at the moment-" Emilia was interrupted by Subaru.

"He looks after you, no friends-are you all alone out here?" Subaru couldn't help but let a bit of concern bleed through.

"Well other than Puck, yes. I don't really know what happened, but everyone in my village froze over and I'm the only one that melted for some reason." At Emilia's subdued explanation, Subaru noticed a bunch of frozen figures surrounding them. By the appearance of them they all looked to be elves.

Shame rushed through Subaru; he hadn't meant to upset Emilia, "Sorry I didn't mean to bring up bad memories. Still I'm sure that they'll be back some day if you thawed out; there's no ice that won't melt afterall."

Emilia seemed to quickly brush off his apology and misstep. She started up the conversation again, as if to change the subject.

"There is a village nearby, but I'm not really welcome there. Still there's this one shopkeeper there, last time I was there he talked to me to ask if I need new shoes; I'm sure we'll be able to talk about things like the weather soon!" Her unrestrained happiness at such a simple gesture made it all the more painful to Subaru.

"Well I'm your friend now. I'll talk your ear off so much you'll be begging for a moment of silence!" At Subaru's exclamation Emilia broke into a small fit of giggles, a small trail of tears unseen by Subaru as she led the rest of the way to her house without looking back.

They quickly arrived at Emilia's hut. Looking over to the fireplace she was glad to see that it hadn't gone out.

"Sit in front of the fire and warm up, I'll grab some towels and blankets," Emilia instructed.

A thoroughly chilled Subaru gladly cooperated. He took a seat and basked in the fire as Emilia came back.

"Once you get your clothes off, dry yourself off with a towel and wrap yourself up in these blankets." Emilia instructed, sounding just a bit more motherly than her age.

should permit.

Her face took on a mock sternness as Subaru stood still blushing in embarrassment, "What are you waiting for? If you don't hurry up you're going to get reeeaaally sick."

"Would you mind looking away? It's kind of embarrassing with you over looking at me" Subaru objected, his face bright red.

"Sure. I don't see what the big deal is though." Emilia acquiesced.

After looking to confirm she had turned away Subaru, wracked by shivers, hurriedly ripped off his tracksuit, and vigorously started toweling himself down. As he finally dried off, he wrapped a dry towel around his waist, and quickly wrapped himself in the blankets. As he sat himself before the fire he sighed in relief.

"It's okay to turn around now," Subaru called out.

"Are you doing okay, now?" Emilia came towards the fire and took a seat, keeping a fair bit of distance.

"Yeah. Thanks a lot, you really saved me back there." Subaru's normally hard eyes had a gentle and genuine warmth to them.

"I don't know how long it's been since someone thanked me. Every now and then someone gets attacked by the monsters in this forest, they always act like I'm the Witch afterward..." Emilia trailed off.

"The Witch?" Subaru pressed his eyes narrowed in confusion.

"The Witch of Envy who almost engulfed the world in shadows. She is said to have been a silver-haired half elf, who I apparently resemble." Emilia went silent at the end.

"Monsters in the forest?" Subaru couldn't resist asking.

"There's a lot of ambient mana surrounding the forest, so a lot of mabeasts tend to gather here," Emilia explained.

"Mabeasts?" Subaru interjected, feeling thoroughly lost at this point.

"Dangerous beasts that are said to have been created by the Witch of Envy four hundred years ago. They're reaaaally strong so you shouldn't go too far away from me out in the forest." Emilia lectured, the slightest tint of warning in her voice.

"Wait, wouldn't they be dangerous for you too?" Subaru voiced his concern.

"I can use magic, and I'm also actually pretty strong," she bragged with the slightest trace of pride.

"Eh, I can believe the magic part, but given your size just how strong can you be? How about an arm wrestling match?" Subaru teased, more curious than doubting.

"Sure, why not?" Emilia acquiesced her cheeks puffed up in a pout.

They clasped their hands together, fixing their elbows to the ground. Barely a moment after Subaru said, "Go!", he found himself slammed into the ground, his shoulder thumping the floor as his arm took his body with it.

Emilia ran to him in panicked concern as he let loose a pained groan. Her face took on a confused relief as she heard him start to laugh.

"Pretty strong?! More like superhuman! Just go a bit easy on me next time we play a game." Subaru managed to squeeze out after catching his breath.

Emilia's face scrunched up a bit, "When you say take it easy do you mean I'm not supposed to win?"

"Not quite. It just kinda sucks to lose so badly you know. It's basically win but make other person feel like they put up a good fight." Subaru tried to explain.

"But I just pushed and it was over...what was I supposed to do?" With that innocent question Subaru's manly pride took a beating.

"Look at it this way, you're really strong so you should be careful so you don't accidentally hurt someone. Like when you play with a baby or little kid.". Subaru's explanation having finally sunk in, Emilia gave Subaru a sheepish, remorseful look. He couldn't help but feel like he'd just kicked a puppy.

"Don't get too down about it; I'm fine," with that simple reassurance Emilia's face broke into a faint, relieved smile.

Just as they settled into a comfortable silence a voice called out to them from behind, "Hey Lia, who's this?"

After a startled jump, Subaru turned around to see a floating cat with ashen fur.

"You're back, Puck! This is Subaru. He got teleported here somehow and fell from the sky into the thorny thicket.". Puck gave Subaru a somewhat confused look before Emilia continued, "I brought him here to dry off and warm up, and was hoping you might be able to help figure out what happened."

Puck gave Subaru a scrutinizing gaze, "Normally I wouldn't do this, but with your permission I could look through your memories to try and figure out what happened."

"That's fine with me. Mom and Dad are probably getting really worried, so I need to find out how to let them know I'm okay.". Subaru gave his permission.

Puck brought his tail to Subaru's forehead and closed his eyes. A few moments of seemingly intense concentration later his eyes opened.

"Geez Subaru you have terrible luck," Puck commented wryly.

"Do you know where Subaru came from?" Emilia asked with hint of reluctance.

"Wherever it was, it's unlike any place on this continent. Subaru most certainly came from beyond the waterfall." Puck explained.

"Is there anyway for me to get home?" There was a tinge of desperation in Subaru's voice.

"I'm afraid not. People arriving from beyond the waterfall is rare. No one even knows how they got here in the first place. As far as I know not a single one of them has even gone back home." Puck gave Subaru a pitying gaze as he delivered the bad news.

"I see..." Subaru trailed off with sudden, uncharacteristic moroseness.

"Lia, why don't we go outside and give Subaru a little bit?" With that suggestion Puck floated towards the door with Emilia hesitantly following.

After they'd stepped outside, Puck turned around to see a somewhat pained expression on her face.

"What's wrong Lia?" Puck mothered Lia.

"Nothing. I'm just worried that Subaru can't go home-," Emilia's weak explanation was cut off. "Lia," Puck pressed his voice rising in intonation.

"I just don't know how to feel. A party of .e was glad that Subaru wouldn't be going away right away. But that's wrong. I shouldn't be selfish like that." Emilia's eyes glistened slightly, a few tears of self-derision budding.

"Lia, everyone feels happy about something that makes someone else sad at some point in their lives. The world's not so kind a place that everyone can get what they want at the same time. The fact that it's tearing you up like this is all you need to know you're a good person. All we can do is try keep the people around as happy as they can be." Puck's face had a touch of sad resignation at the end of his lecture.

Promptly switching back to his normal cheerful self, "Anyways there's nothing wrong with being happy that your new friend will be sticking around for a while. Although I did think I had a couple years before I had to start chasing boys off. Still having peeked in his noggin I think I'll go easy on Subaru."

Emilia let out a slight giggle, "I don't know why you'd need to run off boys. Especially from me."

"Lia, as Subaru would probably say, not everyone is blind." Puck did his best Subaru impression mid-quote.

"On a more serious note, Subaru doesn't have anywhere to go and I doubt the village will take him in if they find out he's connected with you. Since it's too dangerous for him to go by himself, it's probably best if he just stays with us for now." Puck explained with a slight degree of misdirection.

While everything he said was indeed true, Puck could safely guide Subaru to the nearest village unseen. As long as Subaru didn't talk about Emilia, things would probably work out. Puck was reluctant to pass up one of the few genuine chances for Emilia to make a friend near her own age. Someone with no prejudice against half-elves, especially silver-haired, amethyst eyed half elves, was a rare gift. A rare gift that Puck couldn't pass up if it gave him a chance to make Emilia happy. Per his contract, his interference with her life was to be minimized, Puck could only roll the dice, and hope that Subaru could fill in where he couldn't.

His piece said Puck led Emilia back inside. Subaru seemed to have pulled himself back together. Out of courtesy neither Emilia nor Puck commented on how Subaru's eyes were red and puffy.

"For now you should stay here with Lia, Subaru. It's dangerous to leave by yourself and the nearest town won't be too kind if they associate you with her. Tomorrow you two should head into town to get some new clothes. And with that I have to leave and take care of some stuff. See 'ya tomorrow!" Puck vanished while pretending to choke himself after his sign off.

That night after Puck left Emilia chatted for hours with Subaru about what his world was like. Subaru cheerfully spinning grandiose tales. For the first time in a long time, Emilia knew she wasn't alone. And for the first time Subaru could be Subaru without the shadow of his father hanging over him. The windows shook as the wind howled outside, a blizzard raging, but Emilia would swear years later that the house had never been warmer.

And so Subaru's life in a new world began: falling from the sky, crying in the house of the prettiest girl he'd ever met, and ending as if it had been a slumber party the whole time.

***Chapter 2*: Chapter 2**

Chapter 2: A New Day in a New World

A chilly draft drifting across Subaru's face woke him. He awoke to an unfamiliar house. A few seconds of furious blinking later and memories of his arrival yesterday came back to him.

Weirder still he felt arms gently wrapped around him. Gently turning his head slightly to the side he noticed that at some point Emilia had started to use him as a teddy bear and proceeded to snuggle against him like a kitten.

Given how cold it had gotten and the fact that Emilia only had one set of bedding, it had been necessary to share a bed for the night. However, they had gone to bed facing away from each other on opposite ends of the bed.

His face bright red, Subaru tried to gently remove himself from Emilia's grasp. She proceeded to give Subaru a bear hug that would bring a grizzly bear to its knees. Just as Subaru thought he was about to cough up his stomach, her squeeze loosened.

Mostly asleep Emilia let out a groggy, "Don't go."

Though her grip had loosened, Subaru still found himself incapable of moving. The power of her grip was not unlike a roller coaster restraint.

Subaru resigned himself to the embarrassment of waiting for her to wake up wrapped around him. Besides it was rather chilly in the house right now, and having her wrapped around him was rather cozy. He just hoped she wouldn't be upset.

The sun had risen, so Subaru assumed she probably wouldn't be asleep for much longer. Although seeing her face so contented he half expected her to start purring, he had some doubts about that.

Looking around the house, it felt surprisingly empty. He couldn't imagine being all by himself in it, but that had been Emilia's reality for who knows how long. Emilia had Puck, but he had been around for a startlingly short time yesterday.

As eager as Emilia had been to talk with him about himself and his world, she hadn't offered much about herself. All he really knew was that this kind and shockingly strong girl lived by herself, seemingly ostracized from society. Judging by her eyes and ears she was probably an elf or perhaps a half-elf like that witch that she mentioned.

His musings raised the question if non-humans or people of mixed lineage faced discrimination in this world. If Subaru judged based on fantasy stories, such things were common enough.

Nevertheless, at his heart Subaru was a pretty simple guy. He knew she was kind just by how readily she had helped him and taken him in. He'd had fun chatting with her last night. She was a good person that he enjoyed being with; for Subaru that was all that really mattered.

Subaru resolved that if he ever found a way back home, he'd try and take her with him; she in no way deserved to be all alone. His dad would surely get it, repaying kindness with kindness would certainly be what "his son" would do, right? There wasn't a Natsuki family in this world, nor was there a Natsuki Kenichi in this world; so Subaru would have to settle for doing what Natsuki Subaru believed he should do. Even if all Natsuki Subaru could do right now was to try and ease a single girl's loneliness, that simple fact would not change. Besides this was a new world, so why not start a new chapter in the book of Natsuki Subaru; he was starting from zero in a new world afterall.

Despite spending what felt like an hour on such ponderings, Emilia still slumbered away peacefully, firmly attached to his side. The only sound coming from her being her

soft breathing. Unfortunately Subaru had a new problem, he really had to pee.

A moment's hesitation later he had decided, he would have to try waking her up. He had no other means of escape. He managed to wiggle off his side so that he was laying flat and lifted his arm across his body to Emilia's shoulder.

With a gentle tap he called out to her, "Time to get up, I really gotta go."

Emilia's face scrunched lightly and she groggily muttered, "Five more minutes."

Still the arm on top of him came loose and she slowly began to roll flat on her back. Just as Subaru began to get ready to climb out of bed, she fitfully rolled over the rest of the way. As she did so the arm underneath him wrapped around him and swung him through the air along with it. Only the strength of her grip kept him from being flung through the wall. He landed on the other side of the bed with a thud and an involuntary yelp.

Shooting up with a start, at long last, Emilia was finally wide awake.

"I'm sorry. Are you ok? I didn't mean to." Emilia apologized in rapid fire, having quickly realized what had happened.

"I'm okay, just a bit startled. Now I'm sorry but I really gotta go!" Subaru rapidly scrambled to the front door in a frantic dash. Emilia gazed after him in befuddled concern.

Shortly after Subaru came back inside with a relieved sigh, "Sorry, I really had to go to the bathroom."

"Subaru, you blockhead! I was reaaaaally worried. I thought I'd hurt you or something." Emilia's face rapidly transitioned from relieved to a full blown pout.

However Subaru was taking notice of another detail entirely, "Blockhead? You don't hear that one very often."

"How would you even know? You're from a whole other world." Emilia fired back.

Unable to hold back anymore Subaru broke out in a deep belly laugh at the absurdity of the morning's events. Before long Emilia too was bent over from laughter.

Subaru's stomach growling brought them back from their laughter, "Do you have anything here to eat?"

"For breakfast, I have a bag of nuts to eat from," Emilia retrieved the bag as she spoke.

As Subaru ate a worrisome thought crossed his mind, "Are you going be okay sharing food with me?"

"It's fine, I've got plenty to last for a while. If we need to buy more we can gather some pyroxene to sell." Emilia casually brushed aside his concerns.

"Sorry, I just don't want to be a burden to you," Subaru apologized.

"Honestly, I'd much rather hear a 'thank you' than a 'sorry'. So stop worrying and eat." Emilia admonished wagging her finger at Subaru.

A sheepish, "thank you," from Subaru later and Emilia joined him in eating a satisfied smile on her face.

"After we finish eating, we need to get in town while it's warm to get you some a coat and some warmer clothes." As Subaru tried to interject in shame for needing to waste more of her money she silenced him with a half teasing stare.

"Thank you... it's just you're doing so much for me, and I can't pay you back at all." Subaru muttered his face turned downwards as his feet shuffled.

"It's all for my benefit anyways, with this there'll be another person to watch over the forest." Her eyes closed, Emilia nodded in affirmation to her assertion.

Subaru didn't believe her for a second. Oddly enough the more she "selfishly" helped him the happier she seemed to be. Subaru would just have to let her do as she pleased. The fact that seeing her smile made his heart skip a beat was completely irrelevant of course.

"You know though Subaru, it's kind of rude to try and turn down a gift," there was a gentle chiding in Emilia's tone.

"Really!? In my homeland it's considered polite to refuse a time or two before accepting." A tinge of disbelief colored Subaru's surprised rebuttal.

"But isn't it really ungrateful, to not gratefully receive what is being offered?" Her eyes furrowed in confusion.

"In Japan they kinda looked at it the other way. I mean isn't it ungrateful to just greedily accept stuff without remorse or hesitation?" Subaru tried to explain, as Emilia tried to wrap her around the, to her, bizarre concept.

"I guess I should have expected some culture difference," Subaru muttered.

"Culture difference?" Emilia's face made an adorable twist at the unfamiliar phrase.

"Yeah it's common for different countries to have different customs, different thoughts on what is polite, and different myths and legends. Now that I'm actually thinking about it, I'm probably going to come across as weird or rude a lot." Subaru half explained, half mused aloud.

A gentle smile crossed Emilia's face, "I don't think being a little weird is all that bad. Afterall if you were normal you'd want nothing to do with me."

"Then again it's not like my family and I were all that normal even in my home country," Subaru seemed to take a slight bit of pride in that statement.

"Anyways we better get going, it looks like it's almost noon already. Take this blanket and use it as a robe over your clothes." Emilia led him to the door as he covered up the best he could.

"Oi, now that I think about your clothes don't look all that warm. Are you going to be okay? And shouldn't we get you something warm too?" Subaru was suddenly worried.

"Ah, it's not a big deal. Because of my magical alignment the cold doesn't really affect me all that much." Emilia quickly dismissed his concerns.

Subaru supposed it must be true. The reason he hadn't even thought to question the warmth of her attire before now was the simple fact that she had never seemed bothered in the slightest. Once again Subaru wondered if maybe he too could learn magic. Subaru cast his musings aside as he and Emilia stepped outside. The cold still bit at him, but being more covered and not drenched in snow made for a substantially more comfortable trek.

"When we get to the village they probably won't be all that nice to us. So promise me you'll do your best to stay calm and not make it worse." Emilia's warning was soft, and her face more stoic than Subaru had seen up to now.

"I'll do my best," Subaru promised the slightest bit of worry swirling in his gut.

"Also stay close to me, there have been a lot of mabeasts lately," Emilia warned.

Despite her warning though, the trip to the village went without incident. As they passed through the normal noise from the villagers out and about dropped to an eerie quiet. The only sounds reaching Subaru's ears being the whispered mutterings about them.

"Here comes the witch again."

"Looks like she's got a cultist following her now."

A wave of abusive whispers blanketed over them like a foul wind. Subaru almost felt as if he were being crushed by some unseen weight. Subaru himself could barely make out half of what was being said, but as he cast a glance over towards Emilia's ears he couldn't help but wonder if she could hear all of it.

Looking at her face it was eerily blank. The face that had smiled gently, pouted adorably, and carelessly giggled all yesterday was frozen in feigned indifference.

Subaru grit his teeth in anger and clenched his fists. Emilia gently tapped his shoulder and made eye contact with him. He nodded in reply. The promise she'd asked for made sense now. He was wondering if a mob would lynch them any second now. She clearly needed to trade with this village at least occasionally, so keeping their ire to a minimum was necessary.

Looking at Emilia he could see her trembling ever so slightly. Without any hesitation he took her hand in his. He gave her hand a firm, but gentle squeeze. In response she fastened her grip so tightly he couldn't help but wince slightly. Emilia was no longer shaking, so he hoped that his message got through.

Before long they were in the shop Emilia frequented. A crotchety old man ran the store. Though he was gruff and indifferent to Emilia, compared to the people outside his behavior was practically kind. And that made it all the worse.

Numbly, Subaru went through the motions of trying on a coat, boots, and winter clothes. Subaru could barely hear their conversation, his heartbeat was pounding in his ear and his jaw was clenched so tight his ears were ringing.

As they walked out of town, Subaru's eyes were hardened in barely restrained rage. Despite the sharpness of his gaze, when Emilia's eyes met his expression softened ever so slightly. An expression that should have been frightening instead felt nostalgic. Such an expression would not have looked out of place on her aunt's face. Aunt Fortuna's sanpakugan had been her favorite part of her appearance, and color aside Subaru's had felt nostalgic since she gazed upon them.

His grip on her hand unyielding, he firmly guided her out of the village. Although Emilia was many times stronger, she felt powerless to slow him down.

Clear of town Emilia called out to Subaru attempting to calm him down, "Subaru, it's okay."

"No, it's not! The way they treat you is horrible." Subaru couldn't hold it in anymore.

"That's just how the world is," Emilia tried to placate.

"Then the world is wrong! If you're going to hate someone, you should at least hate them for something they did." Subaru's fuming slowed down.

Suddenly Subaru turned to Emilia, admiration evident in his gaze, "You're strong. I don't think I could have made it a day all by myself like that."

Suddenly taciturn, Emilia turned to him with a resigned expression, "Subaru, you can still run back and pretend to have escaped from me. You don't have to go through this with me, as long as you stay with me they're going to treat you like that."

"Emilia, I'm not always the best with promises, but I promised to be your friend and chat your ear off. That's a promise that I meant from the bottom of my heart, so until you learn to tune me out you better get some earplugs ready!" Subaru finished off with a thumbs up.

Subaru had been hoping for a smile or a laugh. Instead tears started flowing from both of her eyes, as they gleamed like amethysts.

"I'm sorry! What did I say wrong?" Subaru panicked.

"Nothing. I'm not crying because I'm sad. I'm just really happy that I met you." A heartfelt smile stretched across Emilia's face as tears continued to trail down her cheeks.

Out of ideas he pulled her into a hug, and she immediately buried her face in his chest. He rubbed her back gently like his mom had when he was little.

It took about 15 minutes for Emilia to pull herself back together. Her eyes were a red, blotchy mess, but a hint of a smile graced her face.

"Is there anything else we need to do today?" Subaru asked with a rather soft expression.

"Just my daily chores of cleaning everyone off, and mapping the forest," Emilia's voice was somewhat hoarse, having cried her heart out.

"How about just today we skip that, and play in the snow since it's such a nice day?" Subaru grinned at her as he made his offer, eager to get her mind off of their business in town.

"Play...in the snow?" Emilia voiced her confusion.

"Yeah you know: making snowmen, sledding, snowball fights." Subaru's enthusiasm grew as he thought about it; such opportunities to play in the snow like this had been rare for him.

"I've never done any of that. And what is sledding?" Emilia had a pensive, but not disinterested look.

"Sledding is when you slide on something down a snow covered hill. On a good hill you can get going really fast." Subaru explained with increasing eagerness.

"I think I know a place, and I can make something to ride," Emilia capitulated to Subaru's enthusiasm. If asked, Emilia would insist that it had nothing to do with her excitement to do something different.

A brief moment of focus later she made a board of ice, "Will this work?"

"That should work great, can you make some handles to hold on to?" Subaru's request was quickly fulfilled.

In short order they were at the top of a steep hill with a long plain to coast across at the bottom. There were a few patches of trees scattered about, but it was reasonably clear for being in the middle of a forest.

As they boarded at the top of the hill, Subaru looked down and took a nervous gulp. Emilia took a seat behind him, an eager gleam in her eyes.

"All right. Ready. Set. Go!" His countdown finished, he and Emilia kicked off.

Due to the incredibly low friction between ice and snow they took off much more rapidly than Subaru expected. Before long they were racing down the hill. Subaru was certain that they'd be keeping pace with a car on the highway at this point. Subaru couldn't resist an excited woop and Emilia's eyes were wide with joy and an almost manic smile

stretched across her face. Emilia's hair was fluttering behind them like a silver flag as it threatened to come undone.

Unfortunately for them, "Emilia, tree up ahead!"

But just as Subaru was about to grab her and bail, "Don't worry, I've got it." Emilia formed a banked ice path leading away from the tree leading to another banked the opposite way to straighten them out.

The two of them gripped on tightly, embracing the adrenaline rush as they went in the upcoming turns. They quickly climbed the sides of the ice path. Just as the right tip of their sled began to slide off the end of the ramp their ascent stopped and they began to slide down into their next turn. At this point both of them were overrun by thrilled laughter.

The rest of the way down passed in a blur. What awaited them at the bottom wasn't the smooth coast along the plains that Subaru expected, but a thick snow bank. The sled caught the snow bank, and Subaru was thrown in face first. The sudden stop launched Emilia and she face planted a few feet past where Subaru landed.

The two of them popped up quickly, a dazed grin on their faces. As their eyes met they burst out in laughter. Emilia's face was ever so slightly red from the wind-whipping on the way down, her hair scattered about, but her face was glowing with joy.

And to Subaru's surprise it was Emilia that asked, "Again!?" Subaru grinned in response and they marched the sled back up the hill.

It was a couple hours later that Puck popped in to check in on Emilia. He was greeted by two smiling kids and a snowball to the face.

"Sorry Puck you popped in right in front of it," Emilia apologized.

Puck looked around to see the remnants of many snowballs, a dented tree, a few misshapen snowmen, and some body shaped indents in the snow at the bottom of the hill. Puck blinked in shock. When he reopened his eyes the same scene was still before him. His ever diligent Lia was happily playing, rather than mapping out the forest or some other chore. Puck just had one biting question.

"Why is there a dent in that tree?" Puck asked.

"Well I had Emilia practice how hard to throw a snowball before we started.. " Puck went silent at Subaru's explanation.

Puck hadn't considered it, but given that Emilia hadn't had a chance to play with kids before she probably wasn't good at controlling her own strength. Thankfully Subaru had somehow realized this and planned for it. It would have crushed Emilia had she seriously hurt Subaru. Still there was a more pressing matter at hand that Puck couldn't ignore.

"Now that I've been struck, however, it's war," Puck followed his declaration by magically levitating a few dozen snow balls. And though Emilia and Subaru fought back valiantly, Puck was the winner of that engagement.

"No fair, Puck. We didn't have a chance," Emilia protested using her best puppy dog eyes.

"This coming from Ms. What-Do-You-Mean-By-Hold-Back," Subaru couldn't resist taking a shot.

"You and Puck are such dullards," Emilia cried out, pouting as her cheeks reddened in frustration.

"Dullards? Don't hear that one too often?" Subaru's interjection made Emilia huff and stomp her foot.

"How would you know?" Emilia shot back.

"Well, Subaru's not wrong you know. It HAS been a long time since I've heard that one." Puck followed up Subaru's punch-line.

As Emilia made a show of stomping off, Puck gave Subaru a covert high-paw. He also uttered a barely audible, "thank you."

Despite Emilia's show of being angry, she was smiling beatifically. She resolved to pretend to be mad just a little longer. Two on one just wasn't fair after all. And when a tree branch dumped a few pounds of snow on the two, she obviously had nothing to do with it.

Shortly after they arrived home that night Puck once again had to go off to do something, she really wished he'd tell her what he was doing. Subaru had set up a makeshift bed on the floor. For some reason he and Puck had insisted that this was the "proper" thing to do. Why Subaru being cold and uncomfortable on the floor was "proper" she had no idea; perhaps boys were just stupid that way. Arch had been similar when he caught her swimming.

The last thought made her head buzz. Her temple throbbed as her stomach rebelled. After a few minutes passed the migraine faded. Arch...why had she forgotten him? Trying to remember anymore just brought her headache back.

"Mom. Dad." She heard a voice sob nearby.

She turned to look at Subaru. Although he was fast asleep, tears were streaming down his face. Now that she thought about it, of course she missed his parents just like she missed Aunt Fortuna and *****. Why couldn't she remember? In fact why HADN'T she missed Aunt Fortuna before now? What happened to her? Not a single one of the frozen statues looked like her.

Giving up on figuring things out for the time being she checked back on Subaru. His blankets were now tear soaked and he appeared to be shivering. He was somehow still asleep though. Honestly this is why she said sleeping in that flimsy bedding on the cold floor was stupid. Nevertheless, Subaru and Puck were HER idiots, and it was her job to take care of them.

She climbed out of bed and peeled back the blankets. She gently picked Subaru up in a bridal carry. She set him in the bed and pulled the covers over them after climbing back in.

***Chapter 3*: Chapter 3**

Chapter 3: Of Lost Memories and Roaming Yetis

A couple weeks had passed since the snow war between Puck, Emilia, and Subaru. A routine had been established where they would wake up, clean the statues, explore and map a small portion of the forest, and Subaru would drag a not so reluctant Emilia to play.

Subaru felt surprisingly content. Though he still missed his parents, he'd made his first true best friend. It had been a bit startlingly to realize, but everyone that he'd had following him around in his antics, everyone that he'd been trying to make laugh, they hadn't been his friend. They hadn't been laughing with him; they'd been laughing at him.

It was a bit of a hollow feeling, acknowledging that most of his relationships until now had been so shallow. Had he and Emilia not crossed paths, he wondered when he would have realized it. All the way in another world with only an elven girl and a talking spirit cat, surprisingly it was here that Subaru finally found a sense of belonging. He wasn't the class clown, he wasn't Kenichi's son, he was Natsuki Subaru, Emilia's friend. And currently her teddy bear, again.

Despite his and Puck's efforts she was obstinate that he sleep in a "real" bed, and every morning he would find himself in this situation. The campaign to protect Emilia's modesty thus led to today's plans: gather pyroxene crystals and sell them off to buy materials to make a proper bed for Subaru.

Today's itinerary aside, there were also long term issues Subaru was beginning to consider. For instance, how were they going to save the frozen elves? Were they going to live in the forest forever? .

Emilia's attachment to the frozen elves worried Subaru. Although she was always happy to have Subaru with her, she would unfailingly insist that she be the one to clean them. Emilia always grew visibly more subdued near the statues. Perhaps more concerning, after some pressing she had admitted to not remembering who most of them were, nor much of her life before being frozen. In some ways Subaru was beginning to feel that the forest was almost a prison to her. She was always reluctant to play until after Subaru dragged her from her "duties", but once he did so she always enjoyed herself.

Still it was time to wake her up, Emilia was very much not a morning person. If left to herself she could sleep in until quite late in the morning. For all her diligence and motherly concern for others well being, on this matter she insisted that Subaru himself just needed to sleep more. Subaru was sure she just wanted him to let her sleep in more. And the thought was tempting, she was adorable when she slept.

"Oi, time to get up," he gently shook her shoulder. She had been getting better about waking up and this time she didn't latch on to him or throw him.

"Five more minutes, it's too early," she answered, still half asleep. Her grip loosened, but she did not let go nor open her eyes.

"It's almost noon," Subaru gave a slight exaggeration, "and we've got stuff to do today."

"You and Puck are soooo mean in the morning, probably because you two don't get enough sleep." Emilia threw a pout and puppy dog eyes his way.

This time, Subaru did not cave in and the two of them were up and about in short order. Emilia quickly found pyroxene crystals for them to sell. Seeing their abundance, Subaru started to wonder if his long term concerns might be just a little bit unfounded. Emilia

cast an odd glance his way as she commented on the feeling of gathering them as being like cleaning someone's ear.

Their peace was not to last, however, as a roar followed by frightened screams echoed in the distance. Without uttering a word Emilia took off in a panicked dash and Subaru struggled to follow. She took half-glances back to make sure Subaru was staying close enough to protect if need be.

They quickly arrived on the scene where a monster Subaru could best describe as a yeti had cornered a family. A reasonably nondescript man with brown hair was holding a knife before him, trembling, as his wife and daughter cowered behind him.

"That's enough!" Emilia cried out as she jumped down from the ledge from which they were overlooking the events below. As she jumped down her long silver hair fluttered behind her before falling back into place as she landed. She directed a strong gaze toward both the beast and the family before it. Her hands outstretched, she conjured several chunks of ice that glowed a radiant blue and launched them. The mabeast roared as it was impaled in several spots.

The fell beast known as a Snow Blight turned to face her. As she prepared to face it the family of three seemed frozen in shock. The daughter's lip was trembling as she barely muttered, "It's the witch." Emilia flinched subtly but proceeded to launch several more ice projectiles into the monster.

As all of this was happening Subaru slid down to where the family was. He moved with purpose as the snow blight roared in pain. Subaru had every faith in Emilia's ability to win, but if he could get everyone out of there maybe they could avoid taking the risk altogether and just lose the mabeast in the forest. As Subaru approached none one reacted at all, their eyes were fixed forward as they trembled in fear.

"Oi! Snap out of it! Emilia's doing her best to hold it off, so the sooner you get out of here the sooner we can all escape." Subaru beat on the man's chest trying to get his attention.

Despite his best efforts to get the man's attention he seemed even more frightened than they had been before Emilia had intervened. And though the snow blight stayed in the man's field of vision, on closer inspection it was clear to Subaru that it was Emilia who was his current focus.

Subaru heard a pained grunt from where Emilia was fighting and without thinking snatched the knife out of the frightened father's hands, his trembling arms barely putting up any resistance. Subaru dashed madly at the creature as it dangled Emilia by her feet before it. Just as Emilia outstretched a hand, Subaru drove the knife he had stolen into the creature's thigh. Taking advantage of the momentary distraction, Emilia quickly launched a spike of ice directly at its face. Just as Emilia scored a direct hit on its face Subaru was backhanded to the side, as he pulled the knife back out.

Adrenaline rushing through his body, Subaru quickly shook off his dizziness and stood back up. As he did say Emilia who had been dropped stood back up and prepared to fight again. To their surprise, however, the snow blight seemed to no longer be interested in them. Instead it had set its sights on easier prey, the cowering family in the distance.

By the time the two of them had shaken off their daze from the blows they had taken, the beast was already upon the family preparing to strike. Emilia fell to her knees, as Subaru made a last ditch charge.

"Hey ugly," Subaru roared as he threw a rock he'd found on the ground at the beast. The rock and noise gave the beast but a brief pause, but that pause was enough for Subaru to close the distance. As Subaru went to bring the knife into the creature's back, it turned around and swung its arms, knocking Subaru back several feet. Subaru landed on the arm holding the knife and as he landed the force of the impact drove the knife into the side of his leg.

As Subaru cried out and writhed in pain, Emilia was by his side in seconds. The creature eyed them, and proceeded to amble towards them as if it had decided they were threats that could no longer be ignored.

"Stop! Please!" Emilia cried out desperately as Subaru forced himself back up with sheer willpower.

The snow blight came to a complete stop afterwards as small ice flowers formed and bloomed on its body. They grew rapidly ripping the beast into a bloody mess from both within and without.

"Thank goodness. Is everyone all right?" Emilia called out as she sank to her knees in relief.

Her answer, however, was a pained, frightened cry from the father of the family of three in the distance. A small ice flower had started to bud on the man's hand. At the sight of it Emilia panicked and she frantically tried to reign in her power.

As she did so the young girl of the family proceeded to frantically rant about Emilia being, "The Witch." Emilia shook her head desperately and went to cover her ears before glancing Subaru next to her.

"Subaru, please run away. I can't control it and I don't want to hurt you too. So please!" Emilia was trembling as she begged Subaru to go. Her breaths were more akin to rapid gasps, as her eyes went wide with fear.

"No. I'm not going anywhere. You can control it. And I know you won't hurt me." Subaru gently pulled down Emilia's arms as they went to cover her ears. He brought his gaze directly to hers.

"I can't...Please." Emilia managed to squeeze out as her frantic gasps and sobs robbed her of her breath. Her heart was racing so quickly and loudly in her ear that she was certain it would explode. Pins and needles stabbed at the ends of her fingertips as her head started to feel fuzzy. Every time the little girl in the distance called Emilia a witch she flinched and tried to curl in on herself a little more.

"Yes, you can. You know why, it's because you are Emilia. You're not some witch. You're not whatever they think you are. You're Emilia, the most amazing person I know. And it's because you're so amazing that I know you can do anything." Subaru drew Emilia into a tight hug and gently started rubbing her back.

"Now, take a deep breath," Subaru advised as her frantic sobs had brought her to the point of hiccupping.

As she did so she opened her eyes. She glanced at Subaru's shoulder and immediately gasped. On his shoulder was the bud of an ice flower.

"Oi, I said take a deep breath. I'm going to be fine. You're not going to hurt me. You're not going to hurt them." Subaru's voice grew somewhat firm as he pulled her in even tighter.

Emilia pulled back and met Subaru's eyes. The only thing she found in them was unwavering confidence. Deciding to trust in Subaru's faith in her she took a deep breath. She swallowed down a few more panicked sobs and took another. Focusing with all her might she managed to restrain the magic she had set loose. Bit by bit, the ice flowers receded.

Seeing their chance the family that Subaru and Emilia had rescued proceeded to run away as fast as their legs would carry them.

Relief painted across her tear stained face, Emilia collapsed into Subaru. With a pained grunt Subaru stood up, the knife still stuck in his leg. He gently picked Emilia's bonelessly limp body in a bridal carry.

Emilia buried her face in Subaru's coat. As she sobbed, a thought crossed her mind.

"Subaru, your leg..." She weakly tried to squirm her way out his arms.

"It'll be okay. Just stay put, you can barely move right now much less walk." Subaru managed to force his voice to stay calm.

"Just be as careful as you can. I'm fine just take care of yourself." Emilia protested feebly.

With great effort, Subaru limped his way back home. He gently set Emilia on the bed, before collapsing into a chair with a pained hiss. Subaru took deep rapid breaths, sweat dripping down his face as he fought through the pain.

"Subaru!" Emilia cried, as she forced herself into a sitting position.

"Let me take a look," though her phrasing was gentle there was worried sternness in her eyes.

Subaru gave in and moved the chair over so that Emilia could a look. As they looked at the wound, what they saw stunned them. A layer of ice had formed around the knife keeping Subaru from bleeding, and keeping the from moving. Emilia tried to bring forth some healing magic, but was unable to.

"Sorry Subaru, it looks I used all my mana when I lost control of my magic earlier. Hopefully Puck comes back soo..." Emilia trailed off before looking even more upset.

"Puck if you can hear me, I need your help," Emilia called out.

A mere moment after the words had left her mouth Puck appeared. His expression turned worried as he took appraisal of the situation.

"Lia, I thought I told you to call me at the first sign of trouble," Puck's voice carried a gentle scolding.

Emilia didn't respond, and merely lowered her head. Puck satisfied with her self reflection went to look at Subaru's wound.

"That's in pretty deep, you're lucky the ice is stopping the bleeding. Anyways clench your teeth. I've got to remove the knife before healing you, and I don't want you to bite your tongue from the pain." Puck calmly instructed.

Subaru braced himself, and as he did so Puck called out, "On three. One. Two-". Puck immediately removed the knife on two.

"What happened to three?!" Subaru howled through grit teeth.

"This way you won't be all tense," Puck answered as he quickly sealed the stab wound.

"Now Subaru had a knife in him, and you're over there so exhausted of mana you can barely move. I'm going to want an explanation of what happened." Puck gave off the air of a stern, yet concerned father.

And so her face downturned and cheeks flush in embarrassment Emilia told the tale.

"I see, I see. Subaru from now on I'm counting on you to call for me when Lia gets stupid about doing stuff on her own. As brave as it was for you carry her here like that, I don't want a repeat." Puck finished off his lecture with a playful wink.

"Puck...was it me that froze everyone?" Emilia's quiet question sunk the room into an uneasy silence.

"I've kind of always thought it was in the back of my head. When I was losing control near Subaru I felt like I was losing Aunt Fortuna and Geuse all over agai-" Emilia's

speech cut off abruptly as she cradled her head.

"Calm down. You don't need to remember right now-" Puck almost sounded as if he was begging rather than attempting to calm her down.

"No! I want to remember what happened! I want to remember who I was! I can't keep running from it, that's what almost killed that family and Subaru today." Emilia made that proclamation with uncharacteristic fierceness.

Her fierceness was quickly robbed by an even fiercer headache. As she writhed about in pain, Puck approached and put the tip of his tail to her forehead. Her eyes shut and she collapsed onto the bed in a fitful sleep.

"What did you do?" Subaru cried out in confusion.

"Having her take a nap. It seems it's too late to stop her from remembering." Though Puck's phrasing was casual his tone wasn't.

"Keep her from remembering!?" Subaru laid his indignation bare on Puck.

"I'd hoped to give her more time, forever if I could. Her not remembering seemed the best way to keep her happy and safe." Puck's voice carried just a bit of icy warning.

"Make her happy!? She might be remembering what happened just now, but she's felt responsible for whatever happened for a long time. Even I figured out that she's been punishing herself the whole time. The only time she does anything other than her 'duties' is for me. She only plays and has fun for my well being. If it weren't for me she'd busy herself in 'chores' all day long. Were you really going to let her punish herself for her entire life for something she can't even remember? For something that I know wasn't her fault!?"

Subaru was greedily gasping for air after finishing his rant. For a few moments Puck was oddly silent.

"Now that she knows she was truly at fault, it'll be even worse-" Subaru cut off Puck's somber reply.

"Are you kidding me, there's no way she would do anything like th-" Puck cut in with a more serious voice before Subaru could finish his rebuttal.

"She lost control of her magic just like today," Puck paused for a moment to let it sink in, but Subaru took the moment to press onwards.

"Today was a panic attack, once I calmed her down she was fine. My mom used to get them all the time, so I just did what my dad used to do." Subaru reduced Puck to a near stupor with his otherworldly knowledge.

"Yeah some people can have moments where they experience extreme fear and worry, sometimes to the point that they think they are dying. Her fear of whatever happened that day and being called a witch must've set it off today. If Emilia really froze all the elves, and that is a big if, whatever caused that must have been super horrifying."

Puck listened intently, and before he could respond Subaru made one more point.

"Besides, saying she lost control might not be completely true, after all none of the elves are dead. They can all be brought back just like she was." Puck's eyes widened as he took that last point.

"I don't know the exact details, but the village was in the process of being wiped out by the witch cult when it happened. Looking at it that way..." Puck trailed off.

"She might just have saved all of their lives," Subaru finished Puck's thought.

"Not that that'll be enough for Lia, she's so kind it's almost a poison to her," Puck shook his head.

"I won't let you talk bad about one of Emilia's best traits. Emilia wouldn't be Emilia if she wasn't an angel after all." Puck closed his eyes in response to Subaru's proclamation.

"Well you're not wrong," Puck caved.

"Puck, if Emilia became able to use magic as powerful as when she froze the forest, would she be able to thaw out the elves?" Subaru's face was pensive.

"Learning to use magic to that degree would hurt Lia," Puck's face grimaced in distaste.

"Do you not have any faith in her Puck!? She can-" Puck fiercely cut in.

"Of course I know she could do it. But there's no need to make her face her past now!" Puck's eyes took a near murderous fierceness.

"You can't hide her away from everything. Puck I've seen her flinch when she saw her reflection. Keeping her like this will just keep her hating herself for something she can't remember." Subaru's voice was somber.

Puck's fury fell and his face grew morose. He gave Subaru an appraising gaze.

"All right. I'll teach the both of you magic and how to contract spirits. It's probably too late anyways, the seal on her memories seems to have broken." Puck vanished on that note before Subaru could get another word in.

A pained whimper drew Subaru's attention back to Emilia. Though she was still asleep, her face was twisted into a pained grimace as tears ran down her face.

Subaru pulled up a seat near her and took her hand. She grasped on tightly, and Subaru thought she looked just a bit calmer. All night long Subaru held her hand, an unmoving, powerless guardian.

***Chapter 4*: Chapter 4**

Chapter 4: Subaru's Emilia

Emilia's fitful slumber was interrupted by all-consuming shadows. Even the field where Geuse had been driven mad and Fortuna murdered by said madman had been consumed. The grass beneath her and the sky above her insidiously blotted out by slowly crawling tendrils of nothingness. Before long Emilia stood alone in an abyss that seemed to consume even sound itself-even her own breath inaudibly extinguished. Even if she were to yell at the top of her lungs, all that would resound in the space around her would be silence.

A figure slowly began to emerge in the distance, wrapped in shadows that rippled about amongst the shadows-cloaked in shadows darker than what had seemed the darkest void. Slowly the shadow clad figure approached, its overwhelming aura bearing down on Emilia. Unbeknownst to her, Emilia's knees caved inwards as she trembled in place. Before long she could make out a face in the distance, a face framed by silver-hair and amethyst eyes. And although it was a bit older, it was a face Emilia had grown to hate seeing.

"Are you...," Emilia struggled to squeeze out a sentence, the overwhelming weight of the darkness around her having squished the very air out of her.

"Yes, I am Satella."

Time froze for Emilia. Standing before her was the unfathomable witch who had consumed half the world in shadows. Standing before her was the reason she had been hated. Standing before her was the person she should hate above all others. And Emilia would have indeed hated her, had there not been tears pouring down the Witch's cheeks.

As sad yet kind purple eyes cast their gaze upon Emilia, the unbearable pressure that had been weighing down upon her vanished. The shadows surrounding the witch receded, slowly merging with the abyss around them, and a black dress with yellow flowers adorning it could now be seen. A face which should have held breathtaking beauty was marred by puffy eye-lids and blood stained eyes. The witch's figure which had seemed so imposing just mere moments ago was visibly trembling, her face twisted in anguish. This was a face Emilia was sure she had worn more than a few times. So she did the one thing she'd always wanted someone to do when she had trembled in loneliness all by herself, she walked up to the Witch of Envy and drew her into a hug.

Given the height difference it was an awkward, unwieldy embrace, but as Satella fell to her knees Emilia was finally able to draw her in properly. Satella went stiff in Emilia's embrace, and a few sobs later took a long, deep breath.

"Sorry, I wasn't prepared to see that that was how Aunt Fortuna died." Emilia was struck speechlessly bewildered by Satella's apology.

"Mom was..." Emilia trailed off her head spinning in confusion.

"Yes, although she was just a kid many years my younger, she was my Aunt," Satella's expression grew somewhat wistful as she talked about Fortuna.

"Then you and I are..." as Emilia trailed off Satella took over, "Not quite the same person."

"You were created as a vessel intended as an identical body for my soul to possess. Although we may share a body and our genetics, your soul and mind are your own." Emilia struggled to parse the unfamiliar language.

Taking pity on her Satella sought to simplify the explanation, "Think of me as an older twin who has caused you all too much hardship."

"Then are you going to..." Emilia had begun to tremble ever so slightly as she pulled apart from Satella in fear that her body was about to be taken. The only thing keeping her in place was the gentleness in her counterpart's gaze.

"No. I have no intention of troubling you or the world anymore." There was a soft conviction in Satella's voice that Emilia couldn't help but believe.

"Then why was I created?" Emilia couldn't restrain the obvious question, a wary anxiousness gripping her soul and her outward expression.

"I can't remember. My knowledge of the world is limited from having been sealed for 400 years. To make matters worse, splitting off from my other half has left my memories of those years in pieces." Though morose Satella did not seem entirely upset with having lost a large portion of her memory.

"Other half?"

"When I took in the Witch Factor of Envy my mind was split into two, and the other side went insane and caused a lot of damage. This is the fate of one who is not compatible with an authority. Geuse suffered the same fate." The last statement nearly brought Emilia to tears.

Emilia had been wondering just what had driven the kind Geuse to kill Fortuna. In many ways she had idealized Geuse and Fortuna's relationship as how a married couple should be, even if the two of them had been too stubborn to actually admit it. Still if the Witch Factor, whatever that was, could drive Geuse to insanity, lead to Satella nearly destroying the world, just what would happen to her if she happened to take one in? Would she freeze the whole world? If she was meant to be a copy of the Witch, did that mean she had the potential to become one herself?

"It's alright you're not me. As you are now, I have no worries about you ending up like me. Our souls are completely different. Your magical affinity is fire, while mine is yin. You are loved by the world's spirits, while I had a poor affinity with the spirit arts. You are Fortuna's daughter, and I was her doting niece."

The deathly silence was broken by an unexpected question, "How is Subaru-kun doing?"

Emilia's only response was a startled, "Eh!?"

"I hadn't meant to bring Subaru-kun to this world as abruptly as I did, I wanted to make sure he arrived okay. The only memories of yours I've seen so far are the ones you just remembered so..." Satella trailed off her face red with nervous apprehension.

"YOU brought him here!?" Emilia's eyes were wide with shock. Both hope and uneasiness whirled about in her gut. She might be able to find out if Subaru could ever return home or not; however, if he could be returned home he might leave her. Shaking off her thoughts, she slapped her hands on her thighs and focused on what Satella had to say, her face bright with steadfast earnestness.

"400 years ago I was very close with another time line's Subaru. Much like you and I are different, YOUR Subaru and MY Subaru are different people. Still the part of me consumed by Envy either doesn't understand or doesn't care, and intended to bring an older Subaru to this world. The circumstances under which she planned to summon him were...horrific though. My interference with the summoning led to Subaru being summoned from and to a different time and it was my wish that he be somewhere that I could see him again that brought him to you."

Emilia wordlessly tried to process Satella's explanation. She had no idea what a time line was. But if there were other worlds, perhaps there was more than one world with a

Natsuki Subaru in it. If that was the case were there other worlds with other Emilias? Just the thought gave her a headache. There was one nagging detail in the explanation though.

"Why would bringing Subaru to me allow you to see him again?" Emilia pressed her once sympathetic expression now guarded.

"The only way for me to break free and counter my other half was to splinter myself off and house myself within you. In doing so I intended to break you from Pandora's restraints. I don't know what she intends, but if the possibility exists that she intends to revive me as the Witch of Envy I cannot allow that to come to pass." A faint conviction lit up Satella's eyes.

"So you're why I can remember now?"

"Yes, as a potential vessel for myself I could not leave you to face the Witch Cult unaware. I am sorry that I had to resurface such sad memories though." Satella's face was twisted in genuine remorse.

"No don't be. For these memories and for letting Subaru and I meet-for those I thank you from the bottom of my heart. To know that I had family that loved me-to have someone who likes me for me-to me there could be no greater treasure." Emilia spoke from the bottom of her heart. She still had many conflicting feelings about the former witch before her, but to know that she wasn't always alone-to no longer be alone-for Emilia who was well acquainted with loneliness there could be nothing more important. As much as it hurt to relive those unfortunate events from around 100 years ago, regaining all those precious moments with Fortuna, Geuse, and Archi filled her with an almost unfathomable warmth.

For someone who valued companionship so-as much as it would hurt her-Emilia had to ask, "Is it possible for Subaru to return home?"

"No," Emilia couldn't help but hate that something so sad for Subaru could bring her relief, "in separating myself I lost much of my power."

A brief pause later Satella continued, "Much of what I could take with me was used up establishing a contract between myself, my other self, Subaru, and yourself."

"You are to be immune to the effects of the authority of Envy, Subaru is to be protected by the authority of Envy, and Subaru's protection must allow him to be able to save you. I gave almost everything I had to control my madened self long enough to establish those three conditions. So even if I knew how, I would longer have the power to return Subaru. My other self is too caught up in her envy towards anyone else capable of being near Subaru to allow him to be stripped from this world." There was a measure of both sadness and satisfaction in Satella's explanation.

Fissures of light began to pierce through the darkness and the boundary of shadows that surrounded them began to crack. Emilia's eyes went wide in panic as the world before her seemed to be ending.

"It seems you are waking up. We can talk more some other night, when you've had some time to figure things out." Emilia vanished from the world of dreams before she could get a word in, in response.

Satella was left all alone in a world filled with nothing but her shadows. Her picturesque face marred by sadness and self-disgust.

"Just how shameful have I become, that I need to use two children as an accessory to my own suicide?". The words merely echoed about, feeling as if even the world around her were condemning her.

"To make it worse, I lied to the little sister that I've come begging to fix my sins."

And so she had, the "contract" binding them had not been fully disclosed. To be immune to Envy's authority as it saved Subaru from death, required that person to be closely tied to Subaru's od. Beyond the consequences of some sharing of magic, it was an unreasonable intimacy to force on someone unknowingly. In many ways it wasn't dissimilar to forming a contract with a spirit allowing the sharing of mana. Even more she had never explained the mechanism by which Subaru was protected, nor the consequences of revealing such.

The reason she had hid those details was at its most basic level kindness and sympathy. It was her dearest wish that Subaru should never need to return by death. Should her desire be realized, there would never be a reason for them to need to know. Satella wanted to protect the innocence of the two children in her care for as long as she could. It was unfortunate that the gap between wishes and reality is often unrelentingly cruel. It was also a sad truth that actions borne from kindness are sometimes twisted into cruelty by an unkind world.

Uncharacteristically Emilia awoke snappishly. Her eyes opened wide, as her pulse pounded in her ears. As she went to wipe the sweat from her forehead she noticed that one of her hands was trapped in a firm grasp.

She turned to Subaru hunched over in a chair next to her. He was passed out, his head limply hanging to one side. It appeared that had held her hand and watched over her all night long.

She smiled softly, before frowning. Subaru had been stabbed in the leg yesterday, and yet he had spent all night watching over and worrying about her rather than resting and getting off the leg. Yet another person who had gotten hurt while spoiling her.

Fortuna and many of the elves had died protecting her. The rules that had hidden her away in the Princess Room, rules clearly meant to protect her and prevent such an attack, she had scoffed at them and resented the loving people that had imposed them on her. Perhaps if only she'd kept her promises with Mom...

Still many of the elves had not been killed, she had frozen them on accident. If she could thaw the ones she froze, then perhaps she could atone by having saved the elves that weren't slaughtered.

Then there was the bigger question, did she actually meet with the Witch of Envy in her dreams? It seemed difficult to think so, and even more absurd to think that the witch would have any association with Subaru.

She shook her head, as if to shake the thoughts loose. She unclasped her hand from Subaru's, climbed out of bed and gently picked up his limp body. Slowly and tenderly, trying not to wake him, she placed him in the bed and pulled the covers over him.

Oddly enough Subaru didn't seem to be cold. Normally he would have been shivering had he slept uncovered like that, but today he seemed to be doing relatively okay. Still knowing him, he'd almost certainly barely slept last night and clearly needed the rest. If she'd left him as he was Emilia was sure that his neck would "reaally hurt" the next day.

Making a sheet of ice, Emilia gazed at her reflection on purpose for the first time in a long time. Her appearance took her aback, she looked notably different than she remembered. Just how long had she been here, doing nothing, polishing the frozen statues, living aimlessly.

She gazed into her own amethyst eyes, and glanced up to her silver hair. How could she hate them when they were things she shared with her beloved mother? The thing that brought her disgust now was her gaze.

Her mother's gaze had been fierce, determined, and strong. Subaru's were often the same, when he was upset on her half his eyes were so fierce she was sure even the fiercest beast would cower before him. When he stood by her side yesterday, his eyes

had had no doubt. When he carried her home yesterday, she was sure there had been nothing but determination in his gaze.

But her gaze-all she could see was weakness and resignation. Perhaps that was the real reason she had avoided her own reflection, not that that she hated her resemblance to the witch (problematic as it was), but rather disgust at who she was-a selfish girl who had gotten everyone she loved hurt and who had pitied herself rather than trying to fix any of it.

If Puck, Subaru, Fortuna, or anyone she'd ever known had heard her thoughts, they would be able to tell Emilia that she was misjudging herself entirely. The softness in her eyes wasn't weakness-it was kindness. The dullness in her eyes wasn't resignation-it was sadness. Her "selfish" desires to help everyone around her no matter how much they hated her-was only selfish in how it's selflessness mocked everyone else's selflessness. However Emilia was all alone in her thoughts right now, and as such there was no one to tell her otherwise.

Emilia spent hours gazing outside feeling numb. Snowflakes were lazily falling and drifting about, blanking out the world in whiteness. This too was her fault. This unthawing frozen forest was her doing. She was the one that had robbed this forest of its color, painted it and herself white-painted it the color of her character.

Emilia was shocked out of her thoughts when a hand fell on her shoulder, "Subaru! What are you doing up already?"

"I could feel you having a meltdown all the way over there. I think that's what woke me up." Subaru gave her an awkward grin that quickly became subdued when she didn't return it.

"Meltdown?" There was a slight upwards intonation at the end of an otherwise dead tone.

"Yeah. You know letting something get out of control and keep going 'till you're about to explode, or something like that." Subaru cast her a knowing glance.

"I wouldn't say that's what it is. I was just remembering my mom, how amazing she was-and how much I don't measure up. I-," Emilia's thoughts were cut off by Subaru.

"Okay! Stop! Stop!" Subaru yelled out while crossing both arms.

"I knew I was an idiot, but I didn't think you were that silly too," Emilia looked almost affronted but Subaru paid it no heed.

"You know I looked up to my dad a lot. I wanted to be just like him. I tried my best to act like him, to do all the things he could do." Subaru took a halting pause.

"I couldn't measure up at all. Everyone liked Dad, but I couldn't make any friends. He was amazing at so many things, and I failed at everything I thought I could be good at. Even the few successes I had were just what was expected of 'his son.'" Subaru's face was twisted by a slight grimace before his eyes began to water ever so slightly.

"But you know getting pulled away from Mom and Dad I realized something-they still loved me just as much as I admired them. Mom was always telling me to stop being so hard on myself, but I let it go in one ear and out the other. Dad was always going on about silly stuff like whether I'd met a girl I liked or not yet, when he was really just trying to get me to open up. And in return for all their concern I just ran around goofing off and running away from everything. If my parents could love someone as ungrateful and worthless as me, I'm sure that as amazing as you are you've got nothing to worry about." A few tears trailed down Subaru's cheeks as he re-lived bittersweet memories of the parents he might never meet again.

"Still, I was the reason..." her soft voice trailed off before ramping into an aggrieved yell. "...it was because of me that she was killed! It was because of me that the village

was attacked! It was because of me that the elves and this forest have been frozen! Everything is my fault, and rather than try and fix what I can, I've spent all my time moping around!"

Emilia's yells grew raspy, her amethyst eyes overflowing with tears. Subaru, however, intervened before the rant could continue, "There's no way that that's true." Subaru's own voice had grown to a shout in order to be heard.

"Stop trying to be so nice! Stop trying to spoil me! You know how dangerous I am, if I had made the slightest mistake I could have killed you yesterday." Her raspy scream barely exited her throat as her voice gave out ever so slightly. Just the thought of someone daring to be nice to her, daring to tell her it wasn't her fault was infuriating. She didn't even know why, and that frustrated her all the more.

What Emilia was feeling was a conundrum that was all too familiar to Subaru. Whenever he had acted out, a part of him deep down had wanted his parents to be mad at or disappointed in him. They never did of course, they kept on supporting him; they kept on loving him. An older Subaru might have been able to process this and keep a level head and understand. But Subaru was not an adult, he wasn't even a teenager. As such he could not cross the gap between knowing and understanding, and was left with an unyielding frustration and desire to make Emilia's self blame go away.

"You're dangerous? To me? That's ridiculous, without you I'd have been dead the day I got here! You're not dangerous at all, I practically owe you my life!" Subaru's frustrated shouts did not yield the result he wanted.

"That debt was more than repaid," Emilia's tone was flat, almost dead. Her eyes lit faintly with some sort of realization. Taking a gaze at Subaru, Emilia seemed to come to some sort of decision. Stifling a sob she turned towards the door, as if to run away from Subaru.

"I'm not letting you go off on your own when you're like that," a frantic sternness colored Subaru's voice as he grabbed onto her arm.

"Let go! Let me go!" Emilia was shaking her head frantically. She began to attempt to tug her arm free from Subaru's grasp.

"Not until you calm down!" Subaru grasped on with both holds and began to pull with all his might trying to keep her from running off.

Panicking Emilia began to flail her arm about violently trying to shake Subaru loose. The swinging of her arm was violent enough that before long Subaru's grip broke loose and he was flung into a wall on the other side of the room. Aside from the thud of his impact and the pained groan that followed, silence suddenly fell upon the abode.

The weight of the silence left Emilia's legs trembling as if she might collapse. Her eyes were wide open trembling in shock. Tremors wracked her entire body, and the moment Subaru began to pull himself back from the floor, her legs folded in on themselves and she crumbled to the floor, just barely catching herself with her arms.

With a pained groan Subaru pulled himself back on to his feet. As he glanced over to Emilia, he saw her collapsed figure hunched in on itself. In between wracking sobs were quiet, almost whispered, words that he couldn't quite make out. Subaru slowly and gingerly walked up to her, his incompletely healed leg enduring shooting pains from where he had been stabbed yesterday. Ignoring the pain, Subaru crouched down and tried to check on Emilia.

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean to..." A litany of apologies poured out almost inaudibly.

Emilia's eyes were glassy and wide with fear. Her shaking had progressed to the point where it almost made her teeth chatter. The little anger and frustration Subaru felt quickly faded into concerned panic.

"Oi! Snap out of it!" Subaru's desperate cry was met with unchanging indifference.

Out of ideas Subaru put one hand on each of Emilia's shoulders and proceeded to literally try to shake her out of it. As her upper body was flung back and forth, she didn't even offer a token resistance. Not a single muscle even tensed up; she simply flopped about limply as she was shaken. But a mere couple seconds later, Subaru's wounded leg gave out and he collapsed face first into Emilia's lap with a cry of pain.

At the moment of impact a spark of lucidity defogged Emilia's eyes. A momentary blink later, "Subaru!?"

"Are you okay!? I-I didn't mean to-but you, and I'm soo sorry-" Subaru cut off Emilia's frantic and rapid yet stilted incoherent rambling. "As long as you're back here with me it's fine."

"But I-," Emilia tried to object.

"Weren't you the one that said it's better to be thanked than apologized to?"

Now that she was able to remember that it was Geuse who had taught her such, the nostalgic phrase brought a wan smile to her face and a dull ache to her chest. She gently flipped Subaru over, and arranged his wounded leg into a comfortable position.

"Thanking you for forgiving me for letting you get hurt again just seems wrong though." An ever so fleeting smile crossed Emilia's face.

"Then thank me for helping with the home improvement. My body imprint on the wall over there really gives the place character." A cheeky grin crossed Subaru's pained face.

"You're sooo mean sometimes," Emilia resisted the urge to punish Subaru by grabbing him by the ear. Despite the slight pout on her tear stained face, there was clear relief in her voice.

"Anyways can you help me up, I don't think my leg will let me on my own."

"I know this is a bit selfish, but could we stay like this for a while. I don't want to be alone." There was an unmistakable weight in that last sentence. To Emilia that sentiment was poisoned with the very height of selfishness-to keep Subaru at her side would be to risk him getting hurt or worse. Despite what Subaru thought, to be near her was dangerous. That was an inescapable truth.

"I'd say I'm the one that's getting spoiled here," Subaru acquiesced with his characteristic cheek.

The conviction on Subaru's face was bewildering to Emilia. He was constantly complimenting her, constantly trusting her, constantly spoiling her rotten.

"Honestly, I'd love to meet the me that lives in your head-she must be amazing," Emilia uttered unwillingly.

"There's no need to meet her; I'm looking right at her. And I'll keep telling her how awesome she is until the day she believes me." A quirky grin stretched across Subaru's face.

Subaru would indeed be telling her so for a long time. If Subaru was intent to look past everything wrong with her, then she would have to aspire to the greatness of the Emilia in his head, Subaru's Emilia. Even though Subaru's Emilia was indeed Emilia, just Emilia.

Afterword

Sorry for the delay I meant to have this out last Saturday or so, but between work, the lightning round of WN chapters, the election, the flooded basement...lets just say it

didn't happen. I really had been hoping to advance the plot more than I did, but Emilia's difficulty coping came front and center, as it really ought to. I feel I spelt it out a little overly clearly, but I wonder if everyone can grasp just why Emilia felt like running away from Subaru mid-conversation.

This chapter I tease just a bit what Satella's motivations are, and the very events that thoroughly knock this story off the canon rails. I agonized over whether to go this way or not for quite a while, but the reason I want Satella in the story and Emilia aware of her is to explore Emilia's character. To have Emilia face the reason she is so hated and furthermore face the reason she hates her own appearance allows for such an interesting character exploration. As much as it seems a much happier path has been laid before our two protagonists, the concept of kind intentions turning cruel will very much be a haunting theme.

Honestly I've been going back and forth on whether I'm happy with my prose or not. My intent has been to let the characters' thoughts and dialogue come to the front, but I can't help but feel that a lot of the writing feels kind of dry. Curious whether this feels fine to you, or if this isn't just an impulse to add some unnecessary purple prose.

As far as review responses go.

This is rated M because before long this series will be just as dark as re zero proper, which is actually rated R. There is a lot of darkness in the world and Emilia and Subaru are going to have to confront a lot of it. If after the next couple chapters people still think a T rating is more appropriate I will change it.

As far as Subaru's apparent maturity. This one surprisingly arose naturally out of thinking how the character would be different under these circumstances. Much of Subaru's worst personality traits stem from the self-hatred that he stewed in for years. This Subaru has not reached those depths of self-hatred, he might not quite be happy with who he is but he doesn't hate himself. Nor has he delved into otaku culture and escapism like his older self had, thus his arrival into Lugnica seems much more grounded (that his surroundings were a lot less fantasy-esque also helps.) Kids can come across surprisingly mature on the surface, especially when they are trying to emulate an adult (Subaru's trying to emulate his father).

If you'd like to be responded to when reviewing please log in, while I happily approve and read all guest reviews I can't pm you a response.

***Chapter 5*: Chapter 5**

Chapter 5: The Death of Innocence

It is often held that cats are prone to sleeping long and often, otherwise there would be no such thing as a catnap. While to call Puck a cat was in every meaning imaginable a stretch, the sentiment was very much shared. So when Puck popped in on Emilia and Subaru it was to his great surprise to find the two asleep.

Nevertheless even with the sun high in the sky announcing that noon had arrived, both were still soundly asleep. Even more unusual was the position Puck had caught them in. Emilia had fallen asleep sitting up with Subaru resting his head on Emilia's lap. Were it not for Emilia's puffy red eyelids and the fact that the two were mere children, Puck might have considered ending the Natsuki lineage.

Something had clearly happened while he had been gone. Everything always happened while he was gone. Still he had been able to lay a false trail for Melaquera, and the spirit had taken the bait. Melaquera was now off to explore a winter wonderland freshly formed in the Augria Sanddunes.

As much as Puck would like to hide Emilia and her power away forever, fate was not so kind as to allow him to do so. The only option left was to buy as much time as possible. Even if hiding had been possible, Subaru had been right: that would not be the right way to bring Emilia happiness. As much as it hurt his pride for his over four hundred years of life experience to be trumped by an eleven year old brat, if it would make Lia happy, then Puck would swallow his pride.

In spite of Puck's desire to let the two of them sleep the day away, a time limit, unbeknownst to the pair in question, had been set. His decision to wake the two of them had absolutely nothing to do with a desire to see Emilia's adorable pout, nor with a desire to one up the snot-nosed brat who had talked down to him a couple days ago- absolutely none at all. Puck formed a good sized chunk of ice over both of their heads and allowed a few drops of freshly thawed water to drip on their faces.

Puck smirked at a job well done, in no way was it satisfaction, as Subaru awoke with startled scream as he jumped to his feet and Emilia shot ram-rod straight with a breathless squeak. Mere moments later both of Puck's victims turned their glares upon him.

"Good morning! Glad to see you both up and ready to go!" Puck's enthusiasm was not well received. Subaru returned a death glare as an answer and Emilia pouted, the slightest hint of a fiendish glint taking residence in her eyes.

Well I was going to start teaching you two magic, but if you're going to be like that..." Puck trailed off.

Subaru's eyes widened in excitement, his mind filled with ideas of unleashing fire storms and death lasers. Subaru was caught on Puck's hook. Emilia, however, was intent on seeking some sort of revenge; perhaps she might stomp, gently stomp, on Puck's tail or ignore him for a few minutes. However, turning to see Subaru next to her, literally vibrating in excitement, took the wind out of her sails.

"Fine Puck. But next time it's war." Emilia gently nodded to herself, assured that her threat would be sufficiently convincing to make Puck reflect on his actions.

"I'll hold you to that Lia," Puck gave her a challenging grin. "Anyways come outside when you finish getting ready."

Subaru made record time in eating his breakfast and getting dressed, and Emilia couldn't help but giggle with fondness as Subaru practically bounced off the walls. Though more reserved and sedate, Emilia couldn't deny a certain amount of

excitement. This was her chance to become just a little bit more like mom, and her chance to make herself safe to be around. If she was going to be selfish enough to keep Subaru by her side, then she was going to have to work just as hard to keep him safe. She also had a village of elves waiting on her to come undo her mistake, she couldn't leave them waiting longer than necessary.

Before long the two found themselves outside standing before an energetic Puck. Puck tried his best to channel his inner teacher, but his attempts to appear wise and firm crumbled in his trademark goofiness.

"Since we've got Subaru here let's start from the basics. Magic users draw mana from within using their gate. Your ability to do so is affected by the strength and quality of your gate. It's also extremely important not to abuse your gate and damage it. So our first goal once we get to past the lesson will be to practice drawing mana from your gate, or in Emilia's case to learn to control it. Furthermore, the range of magic you can do is limited by your affinity. Lia, for example, is particularly attuned to fire magic."

"But I saw her doing ice magic, wouldn't that be water based instead?" Subaru's face scrunched up in confusion.

"Hmm...I can see why you might think that, but no. Fire magic involves the manipulation of temperatures, which is how Lia makes ice, she drops the temperature and condenses the water around us into ice."

"But there isn't enough water in the air to do that. We have machines that take water out of the air called dehumidifiers in my world. The one in my house can run all day and barely have any water in it." Subaru's otherworldly experience and education brought an obvious question to mind.

Puck's face scrunched in confusion as he began to try and make ice using only fire magic. With much straining he was able to produce about a cup full of ice.

"Huh, I've always used just a bit of water magic to help gather the water so I never thought about it, but now I'm curious about just how Lia is doing it. Why don't you try summoning just a bit of ice Lia." Puck turned his curious eyes towards Emilia.

Emilia outstretched her hand, and opened it wide to expose her palm. As she did so a small spike of ice began to form in front of her hand. Puck scrutinized her intensely as she did so.

"Ok. That's good Lia." Emilia let the icicle fade and lowered her hand in response.

"Lia is unconsciously using some spirit arts to use the water mana in the air to help gather the water. Similar to how she does to heal people."

"So what's the difference between magic and the spirit arts?" Subaru's face was so confused Emilia could almost imagine a question mark floating above his head.

"At a basic level it's whether the mana you use is from within yourself or from the outside world. Spirit arts users also contract with spirits for their help. At some point I'd like to show you two how to contract some lesser spirits, but that'll have to wait for a bit." Puck's face looked quite conflicted, a brief hint of resignation in his face at pushing off the topic of contracting spirits.

"Anyways the main affinities are fire, earth, water, and wind. Would you like to find out yours, Subaru?" The eager look in Subaru's eyes was all the answer Puck needed.

Subaru was practically bouncing on his feet waiting for an answer. Emilia couldn't help but giggle at Subaru's enthusiasm.

"All right. Done. And your affinity issssss shadow (yin)." Puck delivered, dragging out the answer as much as possible to taunt Subaru.

"Wow, I think shadow is suuuper rare, Subaru," Emilia chimed in.

"So what does that mean? Do I have some super awesome, rare power or something?"

Puck was eager to rain on Subaru's cautious optimism, "Shadow magic is mostly used for debuffs-" Puck took a long pause savoring Subaru's disappointed face, "is what most people would tell you."

A nostalgic look crossed Puck's face before he continued. "A certain someone I know would be very upset if I left you with the impression that was all there was to it. Time manipulation, space manipulation, dimensional transportation, and even some offensive magic are all possible."

Puck had not expected the news to bolster Subaru's mood all that much, but between the various stories he'd seen in TV and mangas and Subaru's outstanding imagination his impression of the possibilities of such magic were overwhelmingly positive. Subaru's face twisted into a scheming expression imagining all the crazy things he would do as fledgling master of space and time!

"For some reason the face you're making is making me suuuper nervous Subaru," Emilia half teased.

"What I've just got a bunch of ideas in mind. There's nothing wrong with that!" Subaru blew up in mock outrage.

"That's why I'm worried. Remember when we tried your 'skiing' idea out? You crashed into a tree soooooo hard it took an hour for you to wake up. It's my job to keep you from doing silly things and hurting yourself." Emilia tried to put on the air of a stern older sister, but the fond smile that unwittingly crossed her face betrayed her. Afterall, they had figured out the "skiing" thing in the end and had had a great time, even if Subaru's crash had scared her senseless.

"So does this mean doomsday portals, black holes, teleportation, and dimensional decapitation of mabeasts are off limits?"

Subaru's joking pleading was shot down, "I don't know what most of that is, but I'm pretty sure all of it sounds like a reeeally bad idea." Although Emilia had her hands on her hips like a mother scolding her child, her eyes had a joyous, mischievous glint.

"Before we get in to any of that we need to teach you how to draw mana from your gate. Considering your circumstances, we need to be careful. Your gate might be a bit...stiff since it hasn't been used." Puck eagerly diverted the topic away from such advanced magic. Although Emilia would offer token rebukes she might very well cave in in the end, she was just a kid despite her unwillingness to admit her desire to go along with Subaru's games.

"So how do I go about doing that?" Subaru was chomping at the bit to do magic, even if he had to start with the boring parts.

"I'll help draw some mana through your gate and help you cast a spell to get a feel for it. Normally, I'd do something like shamack since it can't injure anyone, but in your case starting with something a bit more focused like minya might be a better idea."

"Minya?" Subaru tried to make semse of the spell names.

"Ah it might be easier to show you, than to tell you. Visualization is important with magic." Puck turned towards a mound of snow in the distance.

A small spear of darkness formed and launched forwards and pierced through the snow. The spear vanished soon after, but the hole carved into the snow remained.

"That," Puck turned towards Subaru's stunned face, "is minya."

"And I'm going to learn how to do that today!?" Subaru couldn't hide his shock, he had expected long hours of meditation or some other sort of tedious drill.

"Well you're going to start learning it," Puck put a strong emphasis on start. "It'll probably take you a few days to do it in any useful way. But most importantly, you ready to give it a try?"

Seeing an excited nod from Subaru, Puck floated up behind him and placed a paw on his shoulder. Puck found Subaru's gate and began to try to pull mana through it. Although there was a fair bit of resistance Puck was able to successfully get mana to flow.

"Alright put your hand out and try to shape the magic," Puck instructed.

Feeling a bizarre yet empowering sensation rushing through his body, Subaru went to work. He could feel his gate and the mana flowing forth. Despite the novelty of the experience, the sensation was oddly familiar; Subaru had no doubts that next time he would be able to call it forth himself. Feeling Subaru begin to manipulate his mana on his own Puck began to take a back seat and observe.

Ensorcelled by the heady sensation of casting a spell, Subaru couldn't help but ponder: why settle for a simple spear or arrow? Now a flaming sword of shadows, that sounded much more awesome to Subaru. And so he imagined, daydreaming having always been one of Subaru's strongest abilities, and before his eyes his mana began to crystallize into black greatsword wrapped in shadowy flames. As he did so the flow of his mana began to stutter, halting and rushing forth without any regulation. What had felt like a well adjusted control knob now felt like a rusted lever with only an on and off setting.

Puck's eyes widened slightly. "Uh oh," Puck uttered under his breath as he worked to gently stop the flow of mana through Subaru's gate.

The sword Subaru had formed was distorting and rapidly fluctuating in size. With Puck's timely intervention it slowly fizzled away harmlessly.

"Well that was a pretty good attempt before your gate went out of control. Since it hasn't had any use I kinda expected it might go like this." Puck looked rather pleased despite the failure.

"You've actually got a pretty decent bit of power in you and very good visualization and shaping of mana after it leaves your gate. Once we train up your gate you should do pretty well." Subaru's face was alight at the praise.

"You mean I can be a really amazing mage?" Subaru's excitement was tinged by disbelief.

"Whether you become amazing or not is going to be up to you. You're never going to be a powerhouse like Lia, but if you can learn to make good use of the power you do have, you could probably be pretty impressive. Your ability to envision and shape your magic would make many mages quite envious."

"So just how strong is Emilia?" Subaru asked.

"Lia will likely grow to be one of the most powerful mages and spirit art users in the world," Puck answered with unfettered pride.

Emilia had her head downturned in embarrassment. Subaru and Puck paid little notice of her discomfort with her power.

"So if I'm a 1 power-wise, then where would Emilia fall?" Subaru couldn't resist asking.

"Hmm...maybe a 5 or 6?" Puck pondered.

"Wouldn't that make me really weak then!?" A hint of disappointment colored Subaru's question.

"It's not so much that you're weak, as Lia's just that amazing." Puck half comforted, half bragged.

Subaru nodded in agreement, "You don't have to tell me that."

A red blush had overtaken Emilia's face and was now running up all the way to the pointed tips of her ears. Her appearance was not unlike a kettle about to go off.

"Would the two of you stop being idiots, already!?" At long last Emilia's embarrassment had boiled over.

"Come on Lia don't be so insincere about it," Puck teased, a glint in his eyes.

Emilia merely crossed her arms as she let out a huff. She turned her head away from the two as her cheeks puffed out in a pout.

"Well anyways it looks like today will be the same exercise for the two of you. You'll both be practicing controlling how much mana you put into a spell and stopping it on command. Subaru I want you to keep trying minya, though please hold off on the fancy shapes for the rest of today. Lia practice controlling how much power you put into humu." Puck's instructions given the two set to work.

A couple hours had passed before Puck called the lesson to a close, "All right that's enough for today you two."

Subaru collapsed to the ground breathless the exhaustion of having used so much magic rolling over him. Emilia meanwhile simply loosened her focused expression, not a single sign of exertion to be seen. While for Subaru this had very much been a conditioning exercise, for Emilia it had been an exercise in control. For Emilia the toll had been almost entirely mental. What had been a figurative marathon for Subaru was closer to spending a few hours working on a jigsaw puzzle for Emilia. It was as Subaru glanced over at Emilia that he understood what Puck had been trying to tell him earlier. He would never be able to match her endurance nor would he be able to match the power behind her spells.

"Good job you two, especially you Subaru. You're already casting a passable Minya." Puck couldn't help but praise his rapid progress.

"All ready!? That's great Subaru!" Emilia who had been too absorbed in her own work to notice her surroundings was astonished to hear that. It was rather rare for someone to learn to cast their first spell in a single day.

Subaru still a bit winded gave her a thumbs up and a cheeky grin. The pride on her face gave way to confusion.

"Puck, why is Subaru so worn out?" The innocent bewilderment was almost biting to Subaru's pride.

"Lia most people don't have anywhere near your amount of mana. Most first time magic users in Subaru's shoes would have passed out an hour or so ago." Puck tried to explain the depths of the very power he had once hoped to keep Emilia unaware of.

"Oh," Emilia whispered. This disparity was yet another reminder of how she set apart she was from everyone else.

"Anyways I have something that I need to do, so let's call things here. I'll be pretty far away so I won't be able to get here right away if you call for help. Please try and stay safe while I'm gone. Also Lia, make sure Subaru lets his gate heal for a couple days, absolutely no magic outside of emergencies."

Emilia nodded at her instructions, her eyes dead serious. As she cast a protective gaze his way, Subaru felt a phantom pain in his ears, Emilia had a tendency to pinch his ears when he was "misbehaving". Before they could get any more words in, Puck proceeded to vanish while pretending to strangle himself.

Unexpectedly having the rest of their day free, Subaru and Emilia were left with the conundrum of figuring out what to do. Subaru did not feel up to anything particularly strenuous with his leg still healing and the fatigue from his magic practice, but he also didn't particularly feel like leaving Emilia to her thoughts back at the house.

"Subaru didn't you say we should make 'snowmen' some time?" Surprisingly Emilia was the one to propose an excuse to stay outside.

"Sure, not sure how much help I'll be today. Let me grab a couple things before we go." Subaru lightly walked off towards the house to grab a scarf and hat.

Before long they were off, at an admittedly slow pace. Tired and on a gimped leg, Subaru hobbled onwards. Emilia kept casting concerned glimpses towards him.

"I'm fine, honestly. I'm not in any more pain than I would be sitting around at home." Subaru reassured, and for the most part it was the truth. Subaru was the type of person who could not sit still and was constantly fidgeting his leg in painful ways, so taking a careful walk honestly wasn't that much worse.

"If you're sure. If it gets too bad I could always carry you." Emilia's tone was colored with genuine worry, in many ways that made it all the worse for Subaru.

"Stop! Stop! I already know that you're the main heroine for this story, but at least let me be the trusty sidekick rather than the damsel in distress!" Subaru cried out in indignity.

"How would you be the damsel when you're a boy?" Emilia's eyebrows were wrinkled in confusion as she tried to parse the meaning of Subaru's odd complaints.

"That's the problem!" Subaru grumped back in response.

"Honestly you can be so sheep-headed sometimes, Subaru." Emilia's face was colored with fond exasperation.

"Sheep-headed? Is that even a word?" Subaru's face scrunched in thought.

"Of course it is!" Emilia's voice rose just a bit in defense.

"Even if it is, I'm pretty sure that no one says that anymore," Subaru couldn't resist taking the shot.

"Sure they do!" Emilia took the bait.

"Really, then when's the last time you heard it?" Subaru challenged.

"Well...Uh...Ok I can't remember, but I'm sure I've heard it plenty." Shortly after they both broke out into light laughter.

"So what is a snowman? All you told me is that we need a relatively flat place and a lot of snow." Subaru's face went a bit sheepish at Emilia's question.

"It's a bit silly you just stack a bunch of big snow balls together and use sticks, buttons and stuff to make arms and a face. It never really snowed enough where I grew up to do all this stuff..." Subaru trailed off a bit a slight blush in his cheeks.

"Oh so this is some game that a lot of kids played in your world?" Emilia cast a knowing glance towards Subaru.

"Yeah. And I'd kind of always wanted to do it at least once when I was younger so..." Subaru trailed off describing a sentiment that had often struck Emilia: the desire to share in the experiences that other people enjoyed.

Before long between their idle chatter Subaru had limped himself to the clearing they often played, far away from the frozen elves to avoid accidentally damaging any of

them. But today they were not alone in the clearing.

They arrived to six men with an appearance befitting either mercenaries or bandits on alert seemingly looking for something. They were armed with a mixture of crossbows and shortswords. The one who appeared to be the leader among them had thick brown sideburns that lead into a thick neckbeard. The assortment of facial hair gave off an appearance not unlike a lion's mane. His companions were fairly nondescript, unkempt, and to Emilia's impression bearing a horribly unsettling look in their eyes.

Behind them was a carriage with several cages, drawn by a pair of ground dragons. Inside one of the cages was a cat-eared girl that appeared to be in her late teens. What would have been a rather pretty face was battered and bruised, her vividly green slit eyes blank seemingly unseeing of the world around her. Long, disheveled midnight black hair draped her hunched figure like a ratty and frizzy blanket, unable to conceal rips in her clothes. Subaru and Emilia were not given much time to worry about the caged girl's fate before the men before them took note of their appearance.

"Ah, speak of the devil and she will appear. Exactly where the villagers told me she'd last been seen too." A sadistic glee twisted the vagabond's face.

Subaru prepared to yell in outrage at how the man addressed Emilia, but a firm hand on his shoulder and an exchanged glance with uncharacteristically frosty amethyst eyes just barely stayed his temper.

As his rage faded, what welled up in its place was fear. Emilia was strong, unbelievably so, but would she be okay against 6 armed men? He could barely walk, no matter how he looked at he was a liability. A useless waste of space, like always. Even the hope that perhaps minya could turn things around vanished quickly, afterall he was magically exhausted and somehow he knew that he could at best fire one more useful spell.

"Are you looking for me?" Emilia covered up her distress in a cold, composed facade. Whether the bandits bought it or not was one thing, but Subaru could tell she was bothered by the slightest tells of her fidgeting.

"Looking for ya!? I've been paid to get rid of ya from this forest. They even paid in advance with that beauty over there. We'll be needin' you and that brat of yours considering that my men couldn't keep their hands off the merchandise last night."

Emilia hadn't quite pieced together the situation, but Subaru had. Someone had put a hit out on him and Emilia, and they'd sold the girl in the cage into slavery to get the job done. Even worse it appeared that the mercenaries were very much interested in enslaving both Subaru and Emilia. The only question remaining: how did they know to look here? Had they ever met someone here? As he racked his head a group of people did come to mind, and he couldn't help uttering it under his breath.

"This is where we saved that family..."

Left unspoken was that this is where Emilia had almost lost control of her powers and narrowly avoided harming said family.

"At least this time it's for something I did," Emilia's voice was whisper-quiet, but Subaru could tell that she had reached the same conclusion.

As he met her eyes, rather than guilt or resignation, he saw an icy resolve. Subaru still know many of the details of her recovered memories, but Emilia as she stood now was unyielding. That the source of such strength was because Subaru was with her would remain Emilia's little secret. So many precious people and memories had been taken away from her, she had no intention to let a single one more be robbed from her. Borrowing a bit of her courage, Subaru stilled his trembling legs and finally managed to get what he needed to say out.

"They're slavers Emilia. We need to get away, and if possible we need to get her out too." Subaru's voice had the slightest tremble in it.

Emilia had no idea what a slaver was, but anything that led to someone being kept battered in a cage was clearly a bad thing. The severity of Subaru's tone hardened her resolve. She had been considering carrying Subaru to safety, but if Subaru as terrified as he was couldn't help worrying about the girl in the cage then there was no way she could choose to abandon them.

"All right. I'll fight the six of them. You take the chance and use minya to open the cage and get her away from here." Emilia's tone was unwavering.

"Will you be okay?"

"I will. Just believe in me." Emilia's request was answered, Subaru gave her his full trust with a nod.

"Huma," with her softly chanted incantation an ice projectile rammed into the snow right before where the mercenaries were standing. Knocked off balance and vision obscured by a spray of snow launched by the impact, they stumbled as Emilia launched forward in a dash.

Seeing his chance Subaru broke out into the closest thing to a run his gimped leg was capable of. Despite his frantic, frenzied hobbling Subaru's pace was excruciatingly slow. A set of panicked cries in the distance drew his attention to Emilia's fight.

Emilia had closed in at startling speed. Two of the men fired off crossbow bolts as they fought to regain their footing. Despite the short distance, Emilia snatched them out of the air effortlessly. A few carefully measured strikes later and the two crossbow wielders were knocked to the ground.

The remaining four brandished their shortswords and went in with strikes aimed at Emilia's limbs, but the strikes were blocked by an ice wall formed with an incantationless sweep of Emilia's left hand. She promptly struck out with her right and downed yet another thug.

Two of the three men were momentarily frozen in shock at the sight of a small girl "mercilessly" beating down 3 grown men. The leader, however, was not so easily cowed. He engaged Emilia with vicious sword strikes. His lacking technique and thoughtless furiosity made each swing broad and well telegraphed. Emilia effortlessly weaved through the strikes with an astounding economy of motion. Once sufficiently within the swordsman's guard, a swift chop to the neck brought him down.

Right as Emilia turned to face the remaining two mercenaries Subaru had finally reached the cage. Grimacing in pain, Subaru shook himself out of it. The sooner he finished the sooner he and Emilia could get out of this situation. Although considering four of the six were already down, perhaps he was worried about nothing. Emilia could be seriously scary sometimes.

"Oi, I'm going to break you out. Get ready to run away with me." Subaru called out to the girl in the cage.

He received no verbal response. All Subaru received as an answer was a surprised widening of her eyes.

"Minya," with a small arrow of darkness the lock on the cage was cut off and the door was now open.

As Subaru set her free rather than the relief or continued indifference Subaru had expected, the girl's face was colored by utter panic. Before Subaru could utter a word, he was roughly yanked back by his arm and a sword put to his throat.

"You. Witch over there, one more move and I kill this brat!" With that shout Emilia was brought to a halt.

"Subaru!"

They had made a fatal mistake, they had assumed that the six men they had seen were all the opposition they were facing, but the total had been seven. There was a seventh man keeping guard over the carriage.

The leader of the group pulled himself back up to his feet, laughing raucously as he righted himself, "The information from our client was perfect!"

"He knew where you'd be, and that the brat that follows the witch around would try n' play hero. He was even right that taking the brat hostage would take care of you."

It had been a setup the whole time. This group had been hired to deal with Emilia because of her power, obviously they'd never been expecting to beat her in combat. They'd been banking on the fact that Subaru would try and rescue the girl in the cage, just like he'd tried to move the family away from the mabeast. When she'd lost control, they'd seen that she hadn't hurt Subaru. They'd even seen him hold her hand as they left the village that one day. From those two observations this plan had been born.

Emilia clenched her hands in genuine anger for the first time in a long time. To hurt Subaru to get at her, once again the people close to her were getting hurt because of her. The scene overlapped with Fortuna being murdered on Pandora's order just so she would open the seal.

Before Emilia could take any action, "Not one move," the vagabond next to her ordered. "If you do anything at all, the kid's head is coming off."

Tears in her eyes, Emilia stood still, trembling. Her mind was racing, but try as she might she couldn't figure out what to do.

"Now that's a better face for a freak like you. Us humans won the war, so it's our right to do as we please with you creatures." The leader's face was twisted in sadistic glee as he basked in his triumph.

"You and that brat still have a bit too much fight in your eyes for my taste," his pondering seemed to spark an idea. "Hey, one of you two get over there and rough the kid up. Make sure someone keeps a sword on him at all times. I'd like to keep the witch in good condition, but the boy isn't worth that much."

Having received his orders one of the two mercenaries, who had just moments before cowered before Emilia's overwhelming might, began walking towards Subaru. Subaru couldn't bring himself to do anything but tremble in fear. If he moved, he might die. If he screamed, he might die. As the mercenary finally reached where Subaru was, he drove a vicious kick into Subaru's gut that doubled him over as he expelled a breathless gasp. Subaru collapsed so quickly that he was almost killed by the sword at his throat. Despite the sword being pulled from his throat a shallow cut was made.

As Subaru collapsed into a tripod position, another kick snuck in underneath him and struck again. A couple of dry heaves wracked Subaru's body before he vomited on the snow.

Emilia unconsciously turned her head away from the sight, before her head was viciously yanked upwards by her silver hair. Her face was pointed towards Subaru as he was beat brutally.

"Enough of that. Go get the whip from the carriage." With the order given the other mercenary near Emilia went off to go procure said item.

While the whip was being brought the other mercenary got a few more strikes in before backing off. The reprieve lasted mere seconds before a deafening crack rang out. A heart-rending cry followed and Emilia barely held back the urge to vomit.

The whip cracked again. Subaru cried out in agony again. This cycle repeated itself ten times, each time feeling like a knife being driven into Emilia's heart. Subaru's voice had

been driven raw and what were once wails of agony, were now screechy, agonized rasps.

"Please stop! Please!" Emilia begged at the top of her lungs.

The flagellation, of course, did not stop. The vicious strikes had ripped through Subaru's coat and exposed bloody torn flesh.

"If you want this to stop," a gleeful voice rasped in Emilia's ears, "you'll be a good girl and get in the cage."

A silent nod later and Emilia let herself be led to the cages by harsh tugs on her hair. Seeing the movement, Subaru was granted a reprieve. Subaru managed to lift his head and with tear blotted vision, noticed Emilia acquiescing to the slavers' demands.

"No, Emilia don't," Subaru managed to squeak out from his mangled vocal cords.

"The fuck is with this kid," and with a mixture of shock and disgust the mercenary who had been whipping Subaru kicked him in the right side of his chest with enough force that Subaru landed on his back, having flipped around in the air. The pain shooting from his whipped back tore another scream from his throat.

"Seriously, he's so scared he pissed himself, his back is ripped to pieces and he's still got all that fight in his eyes." The only answer that Subaru could give was an agonized cough that brought up blood.

It was that sight that froze Emilia in her tracks. Even as she was cooperating, they were still hurting Subaru. At this rate they might kill him. He might even be dying, Emilia was pretty sure that coughing up blood was not a good sign.

Mind made up, Emilia went into action. She fired off a huma after thrusting forth her hand, with but a second's hesitation. But that one second was of crucial importance. Shocked by Emilia's sudden hostility the swordsman holding Subaru hostage slit his throat. Eyes wide, Subaru desperately pressed his hands to his throat as blood poured out unrelentingly.

Gripped by panic Emilia turned and punched the assailant yanking her by her hair with such force that his jaw was shattered. The fragments were launched as shrapnel ripping holes in the other side of his face as they were flew into the snow-covered forest. Had Emilia taken a second to look back she would have noticed that the destruction had spread upwards from the point of impact. The shattering had extended all the way up to the orbit of the slaver's right eye, ejecting it from his skull and leaving to dangle about by the very nerves connecting it to the brain.

Emilia, however, did not waste a single second looking back and rushed at near untraceable speeds to Subaru's side. With a wave of her hand a barrage of icicles impaled Subaru's assailants, ripping holes through them and shredding their bodies such that their forms could no longer be distinguished amidst the bloody, red pulp they had become. Subaru and Emilia were both drenched in blood scattered about by Emilia's carnage.

Grasping desperately on to Subaru, Emilia frantically tried to heal the gash on his neck. Panicked as she was, she didn't have the focus to call on the water mana surrounding her to properly heal Subaru. And even if she had, it would have been too late.

"Sorry...not your fault." Subaru's hoarse voice weakly called out to Emilia.

"Don't. You'll be fine, I'll fix it." The desperation in Emilia's voice made what she meant to be reassurance sound more like powerless pleading.

Subaru grew cold in Emilia's arms, as once again someone dear to her bled out before her eyes. Earth shattering sobs shook Emilia's body as she rocked back and forth hopelessly cradling Subaru's body.

In short order the rise and fall of Subaru's chest stopped. Natsuki Subaru had died.

Or so Subaru and Emilia thought, a bizarre sensation later and Subaru found himself coughing up blood again. Subaru's defiant eyes were now clouded with bewilderment

Emilia, her head fuzzy, slowly outstretched her hand in confused bewilderment as she took her bearings. Subaru was alive? Shaking off the shock of reliving the moment over, Emilia began to prepare to cast magic and once again Subaru's throat was slit in a panicked response. All of this happening so quickly Emilia couldn't help but feel even more dazed.

Emilia fell to her knees. Just what was happening? That question and her inability to save Subaru brought her to hysteric tears. Subaru was dying again because of her.

Forcing herself to her legs, Emilia prepared to make another attempt at healing Subaru. As she made her first step, a bizarre sensation overcame her again. Subaru had died once more.

Once more she bore witness to the sight of Subaru coughing up blood. This time Emilia didn't move a finger. Her grief stricken eyes hardened with icy willpower. Glacial fury coursing through her veins, Emilia willingly called upon a magic that had long terrified her. As Emilia blinked her eyes the only images greeting her in the darkness were the images of Pandora smiling beatifically as her mom died and Subaru's throat being slit again.

In a voice so soft it might be confused as a turn of the wind Emilia uttered, "Die."

At her mind's urging an ice flower bloomed bountifully in the three mercenaries nearest Subaru. In a profusion of icy flower petals their bodies were ripped asunder and a crimson shower incarnadined Subaru and the snow around him.

Once more like a frozen goddess of death she ordained, "Die."

An ice sword forming in her hand she spun rapidly, and with a horizontal swipe cleanly bisected the man restraining her by her hair. A spray of blood stained patches of her silver hair and left drops running down her porcelain face. As he died her victim would swear that her once soft eyes were now piercing through straight to his soul as she reaped it.

On high alert she carefully made her way over to Subaru, she refused to let a single missed mercenary so much as disturb a single hair on his head. Subaru had died twice because of her mistakes; there would not be a third time.

As she gazed down at Subaru's wounded form her glacial eyes melted. Subaru's eyes were glassy, but as she came in to view his trembling slowed. Kneeling down she gently picked Subaru up cradling him to her with the utmost tenderness.

With the little freedom of motion left in his body he pressed his head into her shoulder and cried his heart out. There were no words, no pleas, he simply cried. She wanted to offer some words of comfort, but she couldn't get a single one out. Both arms occupied she couldn't even hold his hand or stroke his hair. Tears pouring down her cheeks she gave him a gentle squeeze, the only reassurance she could bring forth at the moment.

Taking notice of the cat-eared girl trembling nearby she offered the most sympathetic expression she could. Sadly her efforts merely blunted the impact of the frightening visage she had become.

"If you need a place to stay tonight, you can follow me," Emilia managed to squeeze out between sobs.

Wordlessly the girl followed as Emilia carefully hauled Subaru home. The rages of her unleashed magic leaving a raging blizzard in her wake. The people that she had knocked out early in the fight would be buried in snow and freeze to death. Such

thoughts were far from Emilia's mind, however. Most important was that Subaru was in her arms, alive. His breathing was steady. He would be okay. That was all that mattered.

Afterword

Sorry about the delay this was a monster of a chapter to write, with real life being a thing at the same time. I'm releasing this content a bit raw and fresh off the presses so I hope that there aren't too many typos. I still feel that this scene feels a bit rushed, but I feel it's better to get it out and get feedback than to take the few days distance it would take to get that perspective. Perhaps I ought to look in to getting a beta reader.

This scene has shifted quite a bit from what I originally envisioned as I ironed out the story. Initially I had planned to save the first return by death for another moment. The original plan was for one of the people left alive to get a sneak shot in on Emilia that Subaru would intercept and almost die from after infection set in with the proceedings being more or less similar to hyouketsu no kizuna. Thinking about the changes in the timeline and where I wanted to go thematically led to this scene.

Surprisingly the worst part to write was actually Puck's magic instruction at least in time consumption wise. I'm drawing some inspiration from the latest WN chapters as far as how I want to develop Subaru and Emilia, particularly in the possibilities being able to use magic and spiritual arts together opens up. Subaru can't become a powerhouse in the sense that it carries in the rezero world, but that doesn't mean he can't become accomplished and develop impactful abilities.

The aftermath of this event will also be where the story must confront the reality of Subaru and Emilia's current level of maturity, we now reach the turning point for Emilia's first heroine transformation, and the beginning of a major growth point for both characters.

***Chapter 6*: Chapter 6**

Chapter 6: The Brink of Madness

Subaru's cries began to go silent as Emilia walked back to her house, her unknown guest dazedly following. Emilia might have assumed that Subaru had passed out from the stress and trauma of the last few minutes, if it weren't for the fact that he was coughing up blood on her as he gasped for air. The slight bit of blue on his lips worried her all the more.

She couldn't panic though, panicking would keep her from helping Subaru. If she could just buy time, Puck would be back; maybe she couldn't fix all of this, but surely Puck could. Pulling on the water mana from the air, she tried to heal Subaru in whatever manner she could. The sense of his body that the healing techniques brought back was extremely disheartening. Subaru's entire body seemed like one giant wound. She couldn't make the slightest headway into healing all of it. She couldn't even figure out where to start.

Were Emilia from Subaru's world she would have the anatomical knowledge to understand that it was likely that Subaru's lung had taken damage and that she should focus around the chest. But for someone who had no idea of how the internal organs were arranged and what they did, the wounds on his back seemed just as bad as, if not worse than, the blows he'd taken to his chest.

"Puck. Please hurry back. I don't know what to do." Emilia begged in desperation.

"Subaru, please stay with me!" Emilia half-sobbed, half yelled.

She did not receive an answer. Her initial assumption that Subaru had passed out was not incorrect, it was just an incomplete assessment of the situation. Had Emilia and Subaru been in the right state of mind they might have noticed the slight froths of blood brought up by Subaru's crying that he had unwittingly swallowed.

Unable to think of anything else, she focused her hardest on trying to heal everything. Perhaps if she tried hard enough Subaru would stay alive just a bit longer, just long enough...

"Please. Why won't they close? Heal! Why can't I do anything!" Desperation gave way to anger at her lack of ability. Her eyes teared to the point she couldn't even see Subaru as he faded away in her arms.

As heart-wrenched cries ravaged Emilia's body a pair of cat ears flickered, and distant green-eyes grew lucid. The girl who had been frozen in shock and fear all day felt as if she'd just woken from a horrible day-dream. Looking at Emilia's blood-soaked body a frisson of fear ran down her spine as her tail stood on end. The pointy ears, the silver hair, the purple eyes, and the carnage she'd seen told brought images of the witch forth.

The only thing halting her instinct to flee, was how desperately she cried over the boy that freed her from the cage. That and the damnable blessing that had dealt her her hand in life, The Divine Protection of Soul Reading. Blessed with the ability to know the inner-nature of whoever she met, the world itself was telling her that the pair of children before her were overwhelmingly kind and selfless. She could know the nature of a person, but not their intentions, thoughts, or their emotions. It had been mostly kind people who had sold her into slavery just a couple days ago, that that kindness had not been extended to her was beyond her ability to perceive. Even so, the whispers of the world had warned her about the people of the village, she hadn't listened. This time that very same soundless voice was assuring her, and hearing the young girls wails she didn't have the heart to turn away.

Gently putting a hand on the silver-haired girl's shoulder, "I used to be a healer in the village, let me try and help." She did her best to keep her voice calm, being perceived

as a threat could very well see her blood scattered about the forest just like her captors' had been.

Frenzied, desperate amethyst eyes met hers, the tears pouring forth giving them the appearance of glistening gemstones. Seemingly convinced by the sincerity in her eyes the elven girl acquiesced.

"Please. Help Subaru."

Without a moment's pause she set to work. The sheer amount of damage dealt to the young boy's, or rather Subaru's, body was staggering. Weakened as she was from her captivity she couldn't deal with all of it. And given the delicacy of the situation letting the inexperienced girl try and finish the job would be a dangerous proposition.

"I can't fix all of it right now. When they took me they drugged me to reduce my ability to use magic. But I should be able take care of the worst of it." There was an odd sense of comfort falling back on the professional instincts of her trade. Her voice reflected the odd sense of calm that had come of her, that had needed to come over her.

"Please do Miss..." Emilia's voice was twisted with desperate hope to the point she would have looked in place begging from the depths of a full body bow.

"It's Clarissa. Just Clarissa." Her answer given, she went back to work.

It was the first time she had ever tried to heal something while walking as the person was carried. However, given that Subaru's lungs had taken damage she did her best to walk alongside the two and get Subaru out of the cold air. Clarissa could hardly believe the amount of damage that had been delivered to Subaru's body in the scant few minutes that he had been assaulted, just as concerning were the remnants of a knife wound on his leg. Still the biggest priority was Subaru's lung, which although unpunctured had been bruised and was now filling with blood. Oddly enough despite the damage, Subaru's heartbeat was steady and the pallor in his face was fading ever so slightly. It was at that point when she noticed it: the staggering amount of healing magic which was being aimlessly coursed through Subaru's body. Turning towards the silver-haired girl, she saw sweat dripping down her face. The strain of channeling this much mana, through the spiritual arts or not, had to be immense or rather nigh unbearable. Despite some labored breathing and some sweating, there was little else to tell the tale of this desperate struggle.

"How is she..." Clarissa couldn't help but whisper in dumbfounded awe.

Indeed, the amount of mana that Emilia was mustering would be more than sufficient to obliterate several regiments of an army per second. She had compensated for her lack of power and knowledge with brute force and willpower. The feat she was achieving was not incomparable to an olympic sprinter attempting to maintain his one hundred meter dash speed for an entire marathon. Even for someone of Emilia's endurance, such a task was of a level of exertion such that attempting it might very well be fatal.

Shaking the unnecessary thoughts from her head she focused. As long as this situation lasted Subaru wouldn't die, she had one task: to heal as much of the lung damage as she could. With great effort she managed to reduce the swelling of the lung tissue and bring the bleeding to an end. Having burned through the majority of her remaining mana, Clarissa's head spun as a dizzy spell threatened to overtake her. She didn't have time for that, however, there was one more task remaining.

"This is going to be unpleasant for Subaru, but I need to remove some blood from inside of him. Please don't panic." Her warning made Clarissa steel herself.

Unpleasant was perhaps an understatement, thankfully Subaru was asleep. There was only one place for blood in an airway to escape, through the mouth. The only treatment option available to her was to induce magically assisted coughs and forcibly expel the blood. It was quite unfortunate that Emilia drew Subaru in closer in preparation for

something quite painful to happen to him. This had the unfortunate consequence that all the ejected blood was launched directly at Emilia's face.

Had the situation been less dire, the started and panicked look in Emilia's eyes might have been funny. Only the steadying of Subaru's breathing into calm unlabored breaths spared Emilia a full-blown panic attack.

"Was...that...supposed to happen?" Somewhere between stunned, frightened, and exhausted Emilia's question was posed with halting pauses.

"Yes. I just didn't expect you to pull him right up to your face Miss..." Clarissa trailed off, realizing she didn't know the girl's name.

"Emilia. Is Subaru going to be okay?" In a show of unintentional rudeness Emilia immediately pressed in with questions.

"He's not in danger anymore. He's not better, but he's fine for now. Still just to be safe I need you to stop using your healing magic Miss Emilia." Clarissa's voice remained calm, completely unbothered by Emilia's concern-driven impropriety.

A deep sigh of relief later, "Just Emilia, please." After a deep breath in she continued, "Being called Miss feels reaaally weird."

Meeting Emilia's sincerely thankful eyes, the very terror that her figure had struck in Clarissa just moments before seemed silly. Or rather, it would have seemed silly if she weren't stained red in the blood of her friend and enemies.

Mere moments after their exchange Emilia's eyes went back to staring at Subaru with sorrowful worry. Wanting to grant Emilia a brief reprieve from her fretting Clarissa attempted to engage her in small talk.

"What were you trying to do today?" Clarissa immediately wanted to kick herself, in trying to be a distraction she directly brought up the issue she was trying to avoid.

"Subaru wanted to go make a snowman. He said it wouldn't be that hard to do even with his leg healing up." A wan smile crossed Emilia's lips.

Clarissa barely held back the urge to burst out laughing. The girl who had seemed a murderous goddess had just wanted to help her friend make a snowman!? Even more absurd, she had been freed because two kids wanted to build a snowman. How typical that the vagaries of fate couldn't have sent them her way just a day sooner, if that happened then just maybe...

"Subaru called them slavers, what does that mean?" Emilia's eyes never left the rise and fall of Subaru's chest as she asked her question.

Unbeknownst to Emilia, her nervous tremors were clearly visible to Clarissa. How ironic it was that "Just Emilia" and "Just Clarissa" were horrible at small talk and just barely holding themselves together. The question painted Clarissa in an undesirable corner: did she try and protect Emilia's innocence and soften the truth, or did she let her know how horrible the men she had murdered in life had been? If she softened the truth, then she would be covering up just how many lives Emilia had protected in her decisive action. If she told the whole truth she would be telling, an apparently extremely sheltered girl, the truths of the world: of slavery, prostitution, and rape.

"Have you really never seen or been told what a slave is?" Such a reality beggared disbelief to Clarissa given how cruel the world they lived in could be.

A shake of the head was her only answer as Emilia gently stroked Subaru's hair, only half invested, perhaps less, in the conversation she was carrying on. The steely focus Emilia cast upon Subaru deeply disturbing to her feline observer. Getting a closer look, Emilia's eyes were dull and her posture was rigid. She continued to cradle Subaru to

her body-defensively. Although Emilia was answering her questions, Clarissa could have sworn they were miles apart.

"Hey, are you okay? How you had to deal with those guys was pretty brutal." She made sure to keep her tone as gentle as possible.

"What are you talking about? I just froze them temporarily, they should be thawing out soon." Emilia's intonation rose in genuine confusion.

Struck silent Clarissa could only listen, "Still how did Subaru get so bloody?"

"This can't all be his blood, he's here in my arms and not hurt that badly. Although I am a bit worried that he's soooo out of it." Emilia's tone was hauntingly calm, almost cheery.

"Honestly, if he doesn't wake up soon he'll miss dinner," her voice colored in inappropriate fond exasperation she gave a gentle teasing pinch to Subaru's cheek.

Emilia had gone into her own world again, seemingly having forgotten everything around her. The hairs on the end of Clarissa's tail stood on end as she took in the unsettling sight. Resisting her urge to flee, she kept a shy watch from a distance over the two. Outside of her merciless execution of the thugs that had tortured Subaru, Emilia had not shown any inclination to use her overwhelming might for violence. The protective stance the clearly unhinged girl had wrapped Subaru within impressed upon her that maintaining her distance might be a very prudent choice.

The last few minutes of the walk passed quickly, the only sound other than the crunch of their footsteps being Emilia cheerfully humming some off-pitch tune. Before long a small wooden hut became visible. And although Emilia didn't invite her in she also didn't close the door behind her.

"Subaru's still asleep, I'll have to scold Puck for pushing him too hard earlier," Emilia went to place Subaru in bed.

Clarissa, however, had to chance an intervention, "Until he finishes healing it will be easier on Subaru if we can have him sleep sitting up."

Completely accepting but nonplussed about the advice Emilia carried Subaru over to a wall and sat down against it leaving Subaru to rest on her chest. In a show of cat-like content, Emilia nuzzled her face against Subaru's soldier before cuddling against him like a giant teddy bear. Were the two not covered in blood and viscera, it would have made quite the adorable scene. But as it was, it was more akin to watching someone cuddle a murder victim. The only fact that broke the illusion was the steady rise and fall of Subaru's chest.

A delicate yawn echoed off the walls, "I don't know why I'm so tired, I didn't really do anything today."

In the world that Emilia had vacated to, that was a true statement. In her world she hadn't gone to drastic lengths to heal Subaru, since he'd barely been hurt. In her world she hadn't delivered a brutal execution to Subaru's assailants, she'd merely put them in an icy time-out for picking on Subaru. She'd then come home, with someone she couldn't quite remember. And that was strange, Emilia was sure she should know who the other girl was. Emilia's world was a kind and gentle place...if only she could actually live in it.

Emilia's eyes were heavy and her thoughts dazed, it honestly felt like she'd been dreaming this whole time. Honestly she was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open. Surely it wouldn't hurt to take a nap, it wasn't fair if only Subaru got to take a nap.

In short order Emilia dozed off, her head on Subaru's shoulder. As the sound of Emilia's soft snores drifted about the room, at long last Clarissa's legs gave out and she

collapsed to the floor. She didn't know whether to cry, scream, laugh, or do anything at all. Completely lost, she just stared at the wall.

She had no home to return to. She had no family to turn to, she hadn't had any for a long time. The village that had taken her in after her parents had abandoned her had sold her just a couple days ago. They'd sold her to have the witch who dwelled in the forest, the girl sleeping across the room from her, removed. Dead, enslaved, it didn't matter as long as they never saw her again. As a poor village they'd had no money to pay with, and so they'd offered her up, the half-breed they'd so kindly tolerated.

As someone attuned with water-magic she'd had a use as a healer. In exchange they'd let her sleep in the stables, graciously given her what scraps they had to eat, the local doctor had even helped her learn how to heal. For someone of her situation, it was a much better lot than most would draw.

It hadn't been a happy life, but it hadn't been a horrible life. As a young girl she'd held hope that some man might marry her, give her a home, give her a family. Obviously that never happened, never would happen. Not human, not a full-blooded demi-human she'd been too repulsive to draw anyone's eye.

Her divine protection hadn't lied to her, the village had been indeed mostly kind. To harbor someone you dislike rather than leaving them to die was indeed a kindness. They'd even left selling her into slavery as a matter taken only in fear of the village's well being. A decision made in fear of the ice flowers the girl across from her had made bloom. They hadn't just bloomed before the family that had fled back in terror, they'd bloomed all the way up to the very boundaries of the village.

In a sense, the girl across from her was responsible for her enslavement. Despite her detestable resemblance to the witch she had a home, a close friend, and the strength to protect herself. Emilia had almost everything that Clarissa had desired her whole life. This girl who had been so lucky to not even be aware of the existence of slaves, had unwittingly cost her everything.

Even so, neither Subaru nor Emilia had hesitated to save her. All of the misfortune they had endured today had been because they had chosen to free her. This left her in the confusing position of being grateful to the one who had cost her everything.

When she'd seen Subaru on death's door, she couldn't have not helped. Watching people suffer, had been the one thing she could never do. So she'd helped the utterly terrifying girl save her friend. Honestly, watching the spitting image of the Witch of Envy care so deeply about a helpless boy had been nothing less than dizzying. Even in the grips of whatever madness had overtaken her today, she'd been so sweetly affectionate to Subaru that she could feel the cavities setting in just by watching.

Shaking her puzzled musings loose she set forth to find a washcloth. Given the small size of the dwelling and the surprising tidiness for a place only inhabited by two children, it took a couple minutes at most of dazed searching to find one. Dampening it with a minute use of water magic, she went to clean the blood and viscera from the two when an unnatural cold gripped the room.

Frozen by the pressing of an incorporeal weight, she found herself eye to eye with a grey cat radiating a blizzard of murderous intent. Only in fleeting worried glances to the two children, was there any pause in the spirit's unyielding ferocity.

"I'd like to know why my daughter and her friend are covered in blood," Puck's voice was uncharacteristically cold as he gave his demand.

Try as she might, not a single word left Clarissa's mouth. Although wide open, the only sound that left it was a near inaudible squeak. Her legs quivered feebly, threatening to dump in her to the floor as an insensate wreck.

She had thought Emilia had been terrifying earlier, she was now forced to revise that assessment. If Emilia was the reaper, then the being before her was a vengeful god

here to cast judgment on her soul.

"If you won't speak, then I'll just have to pluck it from your mind," Puck had no patience for her terror.

A second later, Puck was ripping through her mind. After satiating his curiosity, Puck's face took on the moroseness of a worried parent.

"Sorry for the scare. Thank you for looking out for them," Puck's voice was much more relaxed, but the shallowness of his remorse was evident. Even so, his appreciation was genuine.

Despite Clarissa's uneasy feelings towards Emilia there had never been any intent to harm, nor any ill-will. That put her in the short list of people who were not hostile to Emilia's existence.

Rather than answer she simply caught her breath and tried to slow her racing heartbeat. Not that her deep breaths brought her much calm.

"Mah, well anyways we need to start cleaning the two of them off. After that you can tell me how best to treat Subaru." Puck's forced cheeriness was deeply offsetting to Clarissa.

"Wait, so you know...what happened back there...aren't you worried about them?" Her voice was tentative, afraid to anger the spirit more than the sight of the two covered in blood already had.

"Honestly, I'm more relieved than worried oddly enough. Lia's always been an overly kind girl, so I'm glad to see that she can harden herself to take decisive action. As sad as I am to see it, she's growing up."

An incandescent rage boiled over in Clarissa. To be relieved that the person you call daughter had so violently executed a group of assailants, such sentiments did not match up with her understanding of what love should be. For the first time today her fear and sorrow had been brushed aside.

"They're just kids! They shouldn't have to make these kinds of decisions! If you claim to be that girl's father, then why weren't you there!?" Her small fangs were bared as her tail went rigid.

"Don't you try and lecture me. No one would like to hide Emilia away from the terrors of the world more than I do. That path, however, has been closed to me. The world is not a kind place for a demi-human much less a half elf and you know that as well as anyone. Unlike you, she can't try and squeeze by on a meager existence at the mercy of others, not as a silver-haired half elf. You know, first hand, the fate that awaited her if she gave in to their demands." Puck's voice was cold and bitter, and in his anger he poked a fresh wound.

Clarissa rocked back as if struck, "But she's just a kid, surely they wouldn't have..."

"Scum that can hold a kid hostage is just as likely to seek it's pleasure in a kid as they were you," Puck was merciless as he laid out the fate Emilia had dodged.

"Besides, they're strong kids. Give them a few days and they'll bounce back. Better she stains her hands a bit, than a lifetime of horrors." As cruel as Puck's words sounded they were filled with pride and faith.

Puck was in no way exaggerating the danger posed to Emilia, uncountable people would want her dead or worse. His deepest fear had been that Emilia and Subaru would be too kind-hearted to protect themselves properly. He couldn't be around all the time, he couldn't be around as much as he even wanted. Echidna's damnable contract would not allow it. But in this current state where Subaru would refuse to let Emilia be hurt and Emilia would refuse to allow Subaru to be hurt, his two selfless idiots would be

able to use the other to excuse necessary violence. No one understood better than Puck just how much what she had done would hurt Emilia, but his doubts about Emilia's ability to handle her past had been misplaced and he had no doubt that she could overcome this obstacle too.

Clarissa's eyes were averted, Puck had just treaded headlessly over a shame she had hoped to take with her to her grave. Puck felt the slightest bit of regret, she had gotten indignant on Emilia's behalf after all.

Taking a deep breath Puck apologized, "Sorry, I shouldn't have taken it that far. Still, I would end the world before I let Emilia go through such a fate, and I won't regret being thankful for any circumstances that avoid her being defiled like that."

Clarissa may not have realized it, but Puck did indeed mean that he would end the world should it spare Emilia that kind of pain. Nevertheless his protective motivation was conveyed.

"You've been through a lot, so I'm okay with letting you take Lia up on her offer on a few conditions: you help treat Subaru's wounds and after you've had some time to pull yourself together you have a woman to woman talk with Lia about the things I, as a boy, can't teach her, and I need you to pull babysitter duty when I can't be around."

The last one took her by surprise, "babysitting?"

"Those two have a tendency to get caught up in troublesome heroics when I'm away. Seriously, I leave for two hours and come back to this." Puck gestured a paw towards the macabre scene Emilia and Subaru made.

"I don't know if I could really stop her..." Clarissa trailed off, doubting her ability to stop someone as powerful as Emilia from doing anything.

"Look, I know you're spooked about how strong she is, but she's a good girl. They're both good kids, they just need someone to make them think things through. I don't have a lot of options, so I'm making due with what I have." Puck shamelessly admitted to using Clarissa's circumstances to his benefit.

It was a doubtlessly true statement that Puck didn't have many options. The amount of near adult people who bore Emilia no ill-will and had a reason to stick around was currently one. It was also true that leaving the kids alone had been a recipe for disaster lately. So Puck took the only option available to him.

Clarissa acquiesced to Puck's demands with a nod as she took the damp washcloth in hand and finally began to clean the blood off of Subaru's body. In short order Subaru's face and neck were clean. The hair would have to wait until Subaru could move around, and the rest would require removing Subaru from Emilia's grasp.

Gently she tried to pry Emilia's arms loose from Subaru, but her response was to tighten her grip and hug Subaru towards her.

"A bit longer Subaru," Emilia adorably grumped mid-slumber.

A second attempt did, however, yield results as her grip loosened. It was as Subaru was rolled over to get a look at his back that Emilia's eyes fluttered open. Shortly after they took a laser focus on Subaru's shredded back.

"Subaru! When did that..." Emilia launched into a confused panic.

She went to hurry to his side when a wave of dizziness and nausea doubled her over. As the memory of Subaru's brutal beating flashed across her mind she vomited on the floor in a sequence of impressive heaves.

"I...those men... Subaru, my fault..." Emilia muttered insensately as dry heaves shook her tiny body.

Puck flew over to Emilia in a panic, "Easy now, calm down and take a deep breath."

Puck gently his paw down her back, as he whispered whatever comfort he could provide. Although Emilia's gastric upheaval had ceased, she was still muttering to herself as she cradled her head swinging it side to side, eyes clenched shut.

"I didn't have to kill all of them."

"I should have acted quicker."

"Subaru shouldn't have had to die."

A litany of such regrets left her mouth, but it was the last one that brought time to a halt, as shadows enveloped the suddenly still room.

In the functioning parts of Emilia's mind was the distant acknowledgement that these shadows felt entirely different than the ones that had wrapped around Satella's form. What had filled the room was an unmistakable sense of malice.

From the undulating shadows that draped every corner of Emilia's vision dozens of hands sprouted forth. One of which went on a straight line to her chest. In short order a shadowy hand wrapped around her heart.

The hand squeezed, ever so slightly. As soon as it had clenched it let go. The hand mockingly clenched and released a few more times.

Even as Emilia trembled in terror, a part of her instinctively felt that this was intended as a threat, rather than an execution. As she cowered, she couldn't shake the odd familiarity of this dizzying power that stopped time. A sensation she had just felt not once, but twice before today-the sensation she had felt as Subaru died.

Something, or perhaps someone within her, let her know that she could not speak of whatever power brought them back from Subaru's death, and that should she break that rule she would find her heart crushed.

The shadows surrounding her receded, and color bled back into the world. As the world came back to life, Emilia breathlessly bent over clutching her chest. The pain was gone, but the heart-wrenching fear remained.

Surprisingly, the icy fear shooting down her spine, brought clarity. Ignoring Puck's gentle fussing she righted herself and walked towards Subaru.

"Lia?" Puck called out in worry.

As she approached Clarissa who had cut Subaru's clothing off his torso, and had been preparing to clean his wounds before her meltdown, she called out with a gentle firmness, "I'll do it."

The firmness in Emilia's eyes and the command in her request, had Clarissa thoughtlessly offer the towel to Emilia. Snapping back to her senses, Clarissa went to instruct Emilia, but such concern turned out to be unnecessary. Emilia cleaned Subaru's many wounds with extreme care and tenderness.

Watching Emilia as she carefully tended to her friend, tears pouring out of her eyes, Clarissa could scarcely believe that she had been terrified of Emilia. What terrified her more was the thought of telling Puck what needed to happen next: Subaru needed to be seen by an experienced doctor, and the only one nearby was in the village that had sold her off to have Emilia eliminated.

Afterword

Before I leave any comments and thoughts I'd like to thank everyone for their kind reviews and messages, the response rate for this story has been unbelievable.

Seriously the review to view ratio is incredible, thanks so much for your support and I hope I can live up to your expectations.

I debated a lot on whether to introduce an original character or not. I wanted some interactions to bridge Emilia's sheltered life in the forest with the reality many demi-humans are experiencing. I also thought a somewhat outside perspective on Emilia might be interesting. Clarissa is intended to be a continuing supporting character, but rest assured that Emilia and Subaru are and will remain the primary focus.

We enter a rather depressing aftermath/bridging part of the story. Subaru and Emilia will be coming to grips with some rather unsavory parts of the world, and in many ways this will shape where they go as characters. I think you can imagine how bleeding hearts like Subaru and Emilia will see the realities of prejudice, slavery, and etc. From here we finally to get to shake some of the cannon rails. I have an exciting and unexpected twist planned 2 to 3 chapters out, please look forward to the next major conflict.

Fun aside, I spent a fair bit of time reading up on the psychology of trauma for this time. Disassociative amnesia and such are very real things, although substantial artistic liberties were taken.

***Chapter 7*: Chapter 7**

Chapter 7: Unexpected Consequences

All of Subaru's being was consumed by pain. His chest hurt; breathing hurt; his head was pounding. But perhaps more pressing was the sensation that his back was being clawed apart. With great hesitation he opened his eyes, and in small movements muted by agony he caught a glimpse of a teary-eyed, blood spattered Emilia tending to him. Just what had he screwed up this time?

It didn't take long for memories of being held hostage and beaten to come back. More confusing were hazy memories of dying. Had he died? Actually, had he died twice?

Shaking the disturbing thought away his eyes went searching for wounds on Emilia. To his confusion, despite her being absolutely drenched in blood, she didn't seem to be hurt at all. Whose blood was that then? It couldn't be his, Subaru was pretty certain he couldn't lose that much blood and live. Shoving aside the reemerging nonsensical feeling that he had died, if it wasn't his or Emilia's blood would that make it the mercenaries? As hard as it was to believe that seemed to be the most reasonable explanation. If Emilia hadn't done something to the mercenaries he wouldn't be here, safe and sound.

"I'm sorry," Subaru's scream-worn voice rasped out.

"Subaru!?" Emilia thoughtlessly wrapped him in an awkward hug from behind, relieved to hear Subaru awake again.

As much as Subaru tried to hold it in, he couldn't help but cry out in pain at Emilia's unintentionally rough treatment.

"Why don't you let me take over and keep him company while I finish treating the wounds on his back," suggested a voice that Subaru hadn't heard before.

"Ah. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." Emilia trailed off in a frenzy of frantic rapid-fire apologies. Subaru managed to force his trademark grin across his face, and Emilia calmed down ever so slightly.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. It's my fault for being useless again." The words of self-reproach barely scratched out of Subaru's throat, yet Emilia's recoil was such that it would have seemed more fitting if Subaru had yelled.

"I'm always relying on you to take care of me here, everytime I try to do anything I just make things worse. That monster in the snow, I stab myself and make you have to worry about me. The mercenaries, I get caught and make you have to kill people to save me. I can't do anything!"

"That's not right at all!" Emilia thundered with uncharacteristic intensity, unshed tears glistening in her eyes. "Both of those were my fault! If I'd have done more, you wouldn't have gotten hurt at all. If I hadn't worried so much about being nice to the people trying to kill us, if I hadn't been so afraid of my power that one time, I could have ended both fights easily."

Left unspoken were further regrets a century in the past. If she'd done anything back then, if she hadn't run away like a scared little girl, then maybe Geuse and Fortuna would still be with her. Emilia hated her cowardice-hated that her inaction kept hurting everyone around her.

"I don't want it to be all on you. I want to be worth something, be a friend worth having. I couldn't own up to the reputation my Dad has, couldn't be a good enough son to repay them even a little bit for being my parents, couldn't be a good enough guy to keep a single friend. And now-now I can't do a single thing for the only friend I've ever had! I'm just as weak, stupid, and useless as I've always been!"

Subaru's already worn voice grated miserably as long simmering doubts bubbled forth. Emilia couldn't help but watch on silently in stunned confusion. A concerned onlooker finally decided to break his silence.

"Both of you did one thing and only one thing wrong-you did something dangerous, when I couldn't be around to watch over you two," a slight hint of reproach colored Puck's speech.

"Lia, there's nothing wrong with wanting to show mercy. Just make sure you don't put yourself in danger." Puck tried to meet eye to eye with Emilia's downcast gaze, but let up and turned to Subaru.

"And you, for someone who's supposedly so useless, you do realize you could have beaten all those guys yourself in a straight fight, right?". Puck's question was met with Subaru's disbelieving gaze.

"Not a single one of them could use magic, a single minya from you could have disabled or killed any one of them, had you not exhausted your mana during practice. It won't be that much longer before you're stronger than them physically too. Lia's so strong because she unconsciously uses her mana to reinforce her body, and you're starting to do that too, albeit nowhere near as well."

Puck paused to let the message sink in. Seeing that he still hadn't hit the mark, Puck was forced to point out the obvious.

"Subaru, do you really think you'd have been able to carry someone your own size and weight a few kilometers through the snow as you were in your old world? Much less do so with a knife in your leg?"

Subaru's eyes widened in realization. Picking up Emilia *shouldn't* be easy for him. Carrying her that kind of distance should have been impossible for him, much less in a princess carry.

"I really don't know what to do, I want you both to believe in yourselves, but I also want you two to stop being so reckless. Honestly!" Puck pawed himself in the face in frustration.

"Now if we're all done blaming ourselves for things that other people did, we really do need to let Clarissa finish dealing with your wounds," at Puck's cue Clarissa who had been nervously watching the events up to now finally went to work.

"Ah. Ouch. Clarissa?" Subaru's question was pointed to Emilia and Puck.

"That's the name of the girl you and Lia saved, she has some training as a healer and probably saved your life." Puck gave a wink as a hint at the end of his explanation.

"Thanks for taking ca-Ah," Subaru couldn't hold back a pained cry midway.

"I don't want to be a big baby, but can you be a bit gentler?"

Seeing Emilia's concerned gaze, Clarissa bit back the kind of sarcastic reply that she reserved for ungrateful patients. To be honest, it hadn't been all that bad compared to many of her past cases. She'd seen grown men in tears from lesser wounds. Although her fear of Emilia had been tempered by the realization that she really was just a scared kid, that didn't change the fact that she had the ability to be seriously scary and she had no intention of risking setting her off.

"You're welcome. And I'm sorry, but there's no way to make this hurt less."

"I was afraid of that," with a deep breath Subaru resigned himself to a long evening.

"Puck is there any chance you could use some magic to clean all the blood off of Emilia?" Subaru asked.

"Hmm...that is an idea. Lia let's go outside for a bit, I don't want to get everything in here wet." Puck's face was twisted with a mischievous grin.

"Eh, outside? But Subaru..." Emilia trailed off in concern.

"I'll be fine for a few minutes. That blood actually makes you look kinda scary. Someone as cute and pretty as you has no right looking that scary." Subaru jested light-headedly.

"All right. I'll be right back." With great concern Emilia allowed herself to be separated from Subaru.

As soon as the door closed, "Can you try and get the worst of it done while she's outside?"

Subaru's question bewildered Clarissa. Her lack of response must have conveyed her confusion.

"She's already blaming herself for everything that happened to me, seeing me in pain is just making it worse," Subaru explained.

"I see. The worst is actually almost over. Just a bit more and it'll time to bandage all of this up." Clarissa smiled softly as she gave the news.

"I haven't told the others yet, but we'll need to get you to a more experienced healer as soon as we get a chance to make sure your lungs are healing correctly. Given that you're awake and talking I think you'll be fine, but given my lack of experience with such wounds I'd rather be sure."

"Where would we find one, I only know of the one village nearby?" Subaru's question brought about an awkward silence.

"I used to live there, and my old master is the town healer. I think I can convince him to take a look." Clarissa's tone was morose as she trailed off.

"Used to live there? Did they sell you, or were you taken?" Reading between the lines Subaru drew the conclusion that one of the two was likely the case. Subaru, like any child, had the annoying ability to innocently poke at wounds without even realizing it.

"Sold. They sold me after your friend's ice flowers spooked the village a few weeks ago. From what I overheard they traded me for her elimination and the waiving of this year's protection money."

Her voice was flat. Neither anger nor sadness bled through, the only emotion perceptible was resignation.

Subaru, however, felt a burning rage. Everything about the situation felt wrong to him. Emilia scared them, so they wanted her killed? They needed something, so they sold one of their own in to slavery? Was this really how the world worked?

"Why? Why would they do something so horrible to one of their own?" The blaze of righteous indignation roared in Subaru's chest.

"That's the thing. I'm not one of their own. As an orphaned demi-human it's amazing I lived this long without being enslaved or worse." Calm acceptance answered Subaru's fury.

"What does being a demi-human have to do with it? You're still a person!" Ignoring the burning in his throat, Subaru could not hold back screaming his honest opinion.

Clarissa cast him a sad smile, "If everyone thought that way, the world would be a kinder place."

It was a bit of a tautological statement. Subaru thought that way because he was kind. If everyone thought that way, it would be because everyone was kind. If everyone in the world was kind, then of course the world would be a kind place.

"Of course. Everyone would think that way if they weren't idiots," Subaru huffed in frustration.

A fool had just declared that it was the whole world, not him, that was stupid. For some reason the very thought was unbelievably funny to Clarissa. To find someone who thought this way had long seemed impossible, and upon discovering one they implied that to think differently was stupid. Yet despite all improbability, such a fool did exist. The fact that she had seriously thought that a kind world could only be a world of fools brought forth cynical laughter. It wasn't the fool she was laughing at though, it was herself. She'd be damned if it didn't sound obvious when he said it that way.

Now that she thought about it, for everyone born half human to loving parents, two such fools had existed. Looking at Subaru through her divine blessing there was nothing to be found but kindness, selflessness, and self-doubt. The villagers around her had had the shade of kindness, but they'd also been stained by fear and desperation. Even when gazing through a mirror she couldn't use her divine blessing on herself, but not for the first time she wondered what she would see. Today she'd been afraid and desperate, interested only in securing her own survival. Would she look like the villagers that sold her?

Her musings were cast aside as Emilia and Puck re-entered. Emilia's hair was disheveled and frizzed as if it had been windswept by hurricane force winds. Her gaze was cast away from Puck, arms crossed, a splendid pout on her face. The impression she gave was not far off from that of a puppy that had had its favorite toy taken away. She was, however, clean and somehow already dry, to Clarissa's confusion.

Subaru, however, let loose a knowing chuckle, "He gave you a whirlpool wash didn't he?"

Emilia merely gave a high pitched, "Hmph," in response.

"Whirlpool wash?" Clarissa's confusion was practically palpable.

"Yeah he sucks you up inside a giant water vortex, spins you around a bit, then lets you down and blowdries you with a bit of fire and wind magic. The end result is right in front of you." The knowing look in Subaru's eyes suggested that he too had been the victim of this treatment.

"There's a lot wrong with this, but is it really okay to get that wet outside when it's so cold?" Clarissa's eyes were scrunched and Subaru wouldn't have felt it out of place for there to be a question mark floating above her head.

"Emilia hasn't ever really been bothered by the cold, and for some reason I've kind of been growing immune myself lately." Subaru's explanation drew an odd look his way from both Clarissa and Puck.

Puck had always been sure to use warmer water and to dry Subaru off quickly in such instances to avoid harming him. Subaru had seemed better adjusted to the cold lately, but Puck had assumed that that had just been Subaru acclimating to the climate.

Inspecting Subaru's mana in detail Puck was surprised to find a small amount of fire mana, a very familiar fire mana. Circulating inside Subaru was a tiny bit of Emilia's mana. Looking at Emilia's mana closely he could make out trace amounts of Subaru's mixed amongst it. Furthermore, on both of them was the slightest bit of miasma, the Witch's miasma.

Puck had never suspected any involvement from the Witch of Envy with Subaru's arrival to their world. People had arrived from behind the waterfall before after all. Even still Puck wasn't ready to assume such an involvement, Subaru had no memories of the

witch and it made little sense to assume that the Witch had an interest in a random kid from another world. Puck's could only assume that Subaru was an innocent bystander entangled with the Witch purely for his association with Emilia. Although why it seemed there was no attempt being made to possess Emilia was beyond Puck. Nor did Puck have any clue why the witch would entangle Subaru and Emilia's magic.

Still Puck needed to say something so that the kids wouldn't go looking into anything too much. Looking into matters involving the Witch had the potential to go very poorly.

"Looks like being exposed to Emilia's magic so much has made you a bit resistant to the cold," and like the best of lies it wasn't really a lie, but rather a misdirection that did his status as a spirit made by Echidna proud. Any protest threatened by Clarissa's disbelieving gaze was silenced by Puck's discrete yet frosty glare.

That slightly worried expression on Emilia's face stripped away any pride Puck felt at his little white lie. Obviously the girl who accidentally froze her entire village would be upset about unknowingly affecting her friend with her magic.

"Don't worry Lia, I'd say that your magic is protecting him to be honest," Puck assured Emilia.

At least Puck was honestly convinced this was most likely the case. When Emilia's ice flowers had budded on Subaru they had not only done little to no damage, they had also served to immobilize the knife in his leg and stop the bleeding. Perhaps the cold might have even numbed the pain. Having a tiny bit of Emilia's mana inside of him did help explain these events. While Emilia wasn't immune to her own power, the effect was less on her than on others. It was after all not a coincidence that of all the people frozen by Emilia's magic only Emilia herself had thawed.

"I just got done discussing this with Subaru, but we need to get him looked over by a more experienced healer. Since he is doing amazingly well, I'd like to go today if possible." A fidgeting tail was the only sign of Clarissa's discomfort.

"Mah, that's probably not a bad idea, but the only place I can think of-" Puck was interrupted.

"Would be the nearby village. More specifically my instructor."

"What will we need to pay him for the treatment?" Emilia went to go check her stash of pyroxene crystals as she asked the question.

"This time Lia," Puck's voice took on a hardened edge, "I believe that this is owed to us."

A fang poked out from Puck's mouth, "If they have any complaints they can feel free to address them to the Beast of the End."

"But I'd feel reaaaally bad threatening them rather than paying them," Emilia half chided Puck.

"Lia, Subaru is hurt because they wanted to have you killed or worse. If the cost of our mercy is just a bit of medical treatment, they should be thankful. Besides, a bit of intimidation might convince them not to try something like this again." Puck tried his best to hold back a menacing face, and perhaps succeeded as Emilia's takeaway was merely that Puck was mad rather than thinking that Puck might annihilate the villagers.

"Sorry to ask this of you," Puck turned towards Clarissa, "but I'll have to ask you to accompany us." Puck was answered with a small nervous nod.

Puck's reasoning behind the request was simple, he needed someone to assess whether the healer was doing their job properly. After all if something happened to Subaru, Emilia would be sad. Besides, it would be just a tiny bit depressing if Emilia's number two fan wasn't around anymore.

As soon as it became clear that they were setting out, Emilia gently picked Subaru up. Subaru averted his eyes in embarrassment, a faint blush on his cheeks

"Sorry that..." Subaru trailed off as reprimanding glare from Emilia met his gaze.

"I mean thanks," Subaru corrected himself.

A gentle smile crossed Emilia's face, "I'm not going to get upset just because you need a little bit of help now and then."

It was in a subdued quiet that a floating cat, a cat girl, a silver-haired half-elf, and a boy from another world made their trek towards the nearest village. The howling wind and crunching of the snow beneath their feet doing little to quell anyone's nerves. Of the four only Clarissa could be seen shivering. True to his claim, Subaru seemed almost completely unbothered by the weather, and Puck and Emilia had never been bothered by the forest's climate.

As they made their way within eyesight of the town, the slight bustle of activity quickly came to a halt. Everyone quickly hustled inside and the echoes of slamming doors resounded across.

That the silver-haired girl was approaching, with Clarissa free and in tow, could only mean that the attempt to eliminate her had failed. The villagers could only cower as they waited for her to reap her vengeance.

In Emilia's field of vision there was only one exception, the man with whom she had often traded was in the open, bowing, his face practically planted in the snow. Slowly, Subaru still in her arms, Emilia approached the prostrate man.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive us. We had no choice." Just barely, the frantically uttered begging reached Emilia's ears.

"Raise your head, please," Emilia softly instructed.

The man did as asked quivering in abject terror the whole way. His head rose to a height where his line of sight now met her legs and feet. His trembling was violent enough that it looked as if his arms would soon be unable to support his body.

"Look at me please."

As the man forced his quivering body to raise his head to look at the half-elf of his nightmares, Subaru managed to turn his head to catch a glimpse. At the sight of the man's abject terror in the face of Emilia, Subaru had the irrepressible urge to laugh. Said urge was expressed not in laughter, but rather in a coughing fit.

The composed, almost cold expression Emilia had mustered melted away immediately, replaced with whole-hearted concern.

"Subaru!" The sight of her frantic exclamation, brought the man bowing before Emilia to a startled halt.

"I'm all right," Subaru assured, taking deep breaths. "It's just I had a funny thought that all the times this guy talked with you to sell you stuff, he can't have ever actually talked to you."

Emilia's forehead scrunched in confusion. Quickly giving up on puzzling out what Subaru was trying to say and quickly gave him a concerned examination.

"Subaru, are you sure you're ok. I reeaally don't get what you're trying to say at all." She continued to inspect him, not unlike what Subaru imagined a mother might do after their child hit their head.

"I'm fine, trust me. It's just...how do I explain..." Subaru trailed trying to find the words to explain it.

"My mom used to say that hearing and listening aren't the same thing. So it's kinda like that." Subaru attempted to explain after a few moments of pondering

Emilia tilted her head slightly to the side, "But if you heard something, doesn't that mean you'd have had to listen to it?" she questioned in a bewildered rising intonation.

"No. I mean like not paying attention or thinking about the other person and what they're saying." This explanation seemed to get through if the sudden light in Emilia's eyes was anything to judge by.

"You mean like when I tell you I have chores to do, and you keep pestering me to go play with you?" If Subaru wasn't mistaken there was the slightest hint of a smirk on Emilia's face at that moment.

"T-that's different. The point is no one who's actually met you could be afraid of you." Though Subaru's voice was weak there wasn't a doubt of hesitation in his declaration.

Emilia's eyes widened ever so slightly and a blush ran across her cheeks. As her eyes glanced to the man who was now staring at them dumbfounded.

"Subaru, you dunce! You made me forget about him." There was no real bite in Emilia's scolding, rather she looked embarrassed.

"Good. I could tell you were about to do something stupid, that look in your eyes wasn't you at all." Subaru confronted Emilia with a self-righteous smirk, all the while suppressing the urge to let her know that he had never been called a dunce before.

"Something stupid I was just going to-" Subaru quickly cut in before Emilia could finish.

"Let me guess, you were going to accept that they were afraid of you and pretend to be all scary so they wouldn't feel bad about trying to kill you."

Emilia's silence was all the confirmation he needed. Subaru gently shook his head with a fond smile. Subaru rolled in Emilia's arms to look at the man in question. He really would like it if Emilia would let him down to try and stand on his own, but he was pretty sure that would end up with his ears and cheeks pinched, and her carrying him anyways; Emilia could be really stubborn when she thought something was for his own good.

"Oi, stand up," Subaru abruptly instructed..

"Since you two have apparently never met, this is Emilia. She's a really nice girl who's apparently decided to forgive all of you." Subaru brashly spoke for Emilia.

"S-Subaru! And I'm not just forgiving them, it's for my benefit after all. You need a doctor and I need a place to buy supplies." Emilia nodded with her eyes closed, as if to convince herself that she believed her explanation.

The man before them had stopped shaking, and at this point seemed more an odd mixture of dazed and relieved than scared. It really had been quite a shock to watch what he had thought to be a witch coming to strike him down in vengeance, behave like a naive little girl quibbling with her best friend. The friend part had been quite the shock too, the whole town had assumed he was her pet, toy, or some spawn of a witch cultist worshipping her. To the contrary they seemed to be on fond enough terms that her response to him teasing her had been for her to tease him back rather than striking him down. Now that he noticed it, the boy in her arms was wrapped in bandages and had some blood on him, had he been hurt when they went after the girl?

"If we've got that out of the way we probably should get to the doctor before it gets too late. I still want to have you two in bed before dark." Puck floated up to Lia's shoulders and broke up the conversation.

A startled jump later, Emilia took the hint hidden in Puck's somewhat stern gaze and regrouped with Clarissa as she guided her to the town healer. Puck, however,

remained behind for a bit.

"Make no mistake," Puck's icy voice echoed, "this village only stands because seeing it destroyed would upset that girl. Lia forgave you and Subaru's choosing not to hold a grudge, but I'm not as softhearted as those two."

There was no trace of Puck's normal jovial disposition. Instead what was coming forth was the measured rage of the Beast of the End. The man had thought he had been afraid of the girl who looked like the witch, it was now clear to him that what he had experienced wasn't even at the starting line of true fear. As he was awash in the freezing weight of the spirit's glacial aura, he found himself unable to move-he found himself unable to even tremble.

"I think I'll have you be my messenger," Puck ordained, his expression flat.

"Should anyone leave even a single scratch or bruise on either of them ever again, I'll show this village a true monster."

His threat delivered, Puck floated away without any further words of parting. His message was well received and would spread across the village soon enough, or at least it would when the old shopkeeper found the wherewithal to move his legs again.

As Puck popped back in, "There you are Puck, did you have something you had to do?" Emilia asked.

"Nyathing too important. Just checking on something real quick." Puck's voice was once more jovial.

Any more ponderings were cut off as Clarissa rapped on a door twice, "Are you in Rum-sensei?"

Subaru resisted the urge to laugh. Rum? Was this guy seriously named after an alcoholic drink... actually now that he thought about it did rum even exist in this world.

A balding, yet kindly looking man opened the door. Upon setting eyes on their guide, he momentarily paused. A sad yet cautiously relieved look came across his face, or at least that would be the impression that an experienced adult would take away. To Subaru it looked like he'd been holding it in all day and really needed to go to the bathroom.

"I'm glad to see you're okay," Rum looked to be at a loss for words.

"Those two over there managed to save me," she gestured over to where Emilia was carrying Subaru.

Despite the unexpected startle of seeing the spitting image of the Witch of Envy, it did not escape the man's notice that the boy in the girl's arms was clearly hurt.

"Well get the boy in here and I'll take a look," Rum squashed his fear and prepared to get to work.

As they walked in he gestured to a makeshift bed in the center of the room. Rather than an actual bed it was closer to a wooden table with sheets layered on top. While most of his work was indeed house calls, it was not unusual for a wounded person to be brought in and this had served as a solution well enough. An actual bed would be ruined by blood too quickly.

Emilia took great care in setting him down gently, making sure to lay him on his side. Without much adieu he set to work, consulting with Clarissa about what had happened and what had been down.

It was an hour or so of inspections and piecemeal healing before they finished. The whole while Emilia fidgeted anxiously on the other side of the room. Having finished the town healer finally took notice of her worry.

"He's healing up just fine. If everything goes well he'll be back to normal by morning."

Her hand to her chest Emilia let out a deep sigh of relief.

"Thank you sooo much," she gave the doctor an honest, heart-melting smile.

"Still, I'd like him to stay overnight, so I can check that the healing is taking properly every few hours. You can come and get him in the morning." Rum gave his orders in what he hoped was his most reassuring voice.

"I'm not leaving Subaru by himself," Emilia's voice carried an unexpected edge to it, beyond what could be written off as childish stubbornness. The slight chill in the air and Clarissa's shaking head were enough to convince Rum to leave it.

"I don't have another bed, but I'll bring out a chair and some blankets."

"That's fine. Thank you."

Rum hurried off, a bit spooked and eager to get some distance. He took his time gathering the blankets and chair, hoping that a few minutes break would help him wrap his head around what was happening. As he returned to the room the girl had not budged an inch from the boy's side. He walked into a conversation and chose to wait for them to finish, or at least he wanted to avoid interrupting them; he was pretty sure that angering the silver-haired elf was a very bad idea.

"Emilia, you can go home and sleep. I'll be alright for tonight." The boy almost appeared embarrassed about something.

"Absolutely not," her hands on her hips Emilia looked for all the world like a little girl playing at being a stern mother.

"What if something happens again and this time I'm not around. Besides there won't be anyone..." Emilia trailed off a distinct sadness in her voice.

Subaru however could make out the unspoken, "I don't want to be alone." As much as he wanted to apologize-as much as he wanted to fuss over her getting enough sleep Subaru knew what she wanted to hear the most, "thanks."

"You should try and get some sleep, I think that's supposed to make you get better faster," Emilia gently fawned over Subaru's well being.

"I'm really tired, but I just can't you know," Subaru explained.

"I could sing you a lullaby, would that help?" Emilia offered.

"Please no," Subaru's drooping eyes widened, "you know I think you're amazing, but your singing is the stuff of nightmares."

"You're so mean sometimes," Emilia's face puffed out in an indignant pout, "but considering how a mabeast ran away from us the last time I practiced you might have a point."

Sensing an opening Rum brought the chairs and blankets to Emilia's side.

"Oh, thank you," Emilia quickly took a seat next to Subaru immediately clasping on to his hand.

No sooner than she had wrapped the blankets around herself did she begin to nod off. In short order, she slumped over with her head resting on Subaru's side.

Clarissa was the only one who didn't seem too surprised by this outcome, "She did use up a huge amount of mana trying to keep you alive, Subaru."

A brief pause later, "To be honest, I'm amazed she woke up again at all today."

"That sounds about right, she was probably too busy worrying about me and everyone else to realize she was exhausted," smiling down on her fondly, he carefully repositioned her to a more comfortable resting position.

Rum couldn't help but ask, "Just how did the two of you meet?"

It was the question of the day, just how did a normal boy end up friends with the Witch's doppelganger. He didn't seem to be her pet or anything nor did he seem to be worshipping her. So the question of what drove the two together remained a mystery.

"Well I kinda fell from the sky one day, she saved my life, and then we became friends," Subaru answered with all of the naive bluntness of childhood.

Rum and Clarissa were stricken silent, trying to make sense of anything that was happening today. Before the conversation could continue any further, Emilia's pained whimpers drew Subaru's attention back to her sleeping form. He gently began to stroke her hair with his free hand and she quickly calmed down.

"I should have figured she'd have nightmares again after today," Subaru gave a resigned sigh.

In response to Subaru's ministrations, Emilia's face snuggled up against Subaru. Before long Subaru's eyes too drifted closed and the two were finally asleep. Unwilling to disturb the two, Rum and Clarissa retreated to another room. The two took seats at a dining table and spent a few moments awash in an uncomfortable silence.

The first to break the silence was Rum, "First of all I owe you an explanation, there's no way to apologize, but you do deserve to know what happened."

Rum took a deep breath and mustered his courage before continuing, "As you know trade's been pretty bad this year for our village, just a couple days ago the mercenaries came to collect their annual protection fee and there was no way we could pay."

"At first we tried offering up the location of the elf girl in the forest, trying to get rid of two dangers to our village in one go. That wasn't enough so we had to vote on one person to sell into slavery to meet this year's fee..."

Rum trailed off seemingly unwilling to state the obvious. Forced to sacrifice one of their group they'd chosen to cast out the outsider demi-human. There was no option not to sacrifice someone, trying to stand up to the mercenary group would only end up with the village raided and burned to the ground with everyone doomed to perish from starvation and exposure.

Such was life in this impoverished region of the Mathers family's territory. What had been fertile farmland a hundred years ago, was now reduced to a near tundra. Forced to adapt the villages near the forest had transitioned to an economy that eked out a meager existence on trade. Lacking in any meaningful resources the territory received little to no support and protection from their lord.

The many mercenary bands borne of the region's abject poverty had banded together and seized the opportunity, using intimidation to extract what little wealth there was to be found and enjoying a lucrative slave. Indeed the region's sad fate had been turned into opportunity for those greedy or desperate enough. It had seemed a useless situation, until recently.

When Emilia exited the forest to trade she brought with her pyroxene crystals, pyroxene crystals that had to have been mined in the forest. With those crystals a path forward could be carved, such an export would enable the village to establish and rebuild, to be worthy of the protection of both the kingdom and their liege lord. There was only one problem, the forest was hers. Anyone who entered was run off by her for their own "safety". To have Emilia moved wouldn't just be removing a potential danger and undesirable, it would securing a meal ticket and the safety of their town.

Such details were only understood surface deep by Clarissa and would be completely beyond Emilia. Surprisingly the only one in the house other than Rum, who could likely be able to grasp the realities of the situation would be Subaru with his modern education. It was also true that this was a situation where no apology could be issued. In the end, as regrettable as it was, everyone in the village would make the same decision again.

Even now Rum had the urge in the back of his mind to try and kill Emilia in her sleep. With her gone, they could take the forest. With the wealth resulting from the pyroxene crystals even Clarissa could be saved. Only two things stayed Rum's hands: fear of failing and the inescapable impression he'd had of Emilia as a lonely kid with only one friend in the whole world.

Rum wouldn't explain any of the details to Clarissa. He had no intention to beg for the town's forgiveness. He just felt that she deserved to know why-deserved to know that it wasn't out of malice but of desperation and need.

"I can't say that makes it any better," Clarissa took a deep, shaky breath, "but I understand."

"That's more than we could ask for," Rum ended abruptly on that thought, unsure of just what to say.

A length pause later he broke the silence, "Did she take out all of the mercenaries?"

"No," Clarissa shook her head, "she just took out the ones that took me. The men were too... distracted to move quickly."

A pitying look took perch on Rum's face, "Did they-"

"Every single one of them at least twice each in the single day they had me. Demi-humans might be disgusting in their eyes, but apparently I was still appealing enough to take to bed." Her voice was flat, only the slightest bit of anger distorting it.

"I-," Rum tried to say something but was quickly cut off before he could get a word out.

"Don't say you're sorry. I won't forgive this village; I can't forgive this village. But I don't want to hold a grudge. If you start feeling sorry, if you regret prioritizing saving the village over one person that makes what happened meaningless. I can't move on if all of this happened for no reason."

As much as Clarissa wanted to cry, as much as she wanted to scream, her eyes wouldn't water and her voice wouldn't raise. Ever since she had been freed she'd felt akin to a marionette, being dragged about aimlessly by unseen strings. If anger, sadness, and the right to choose her own fate had been taken from her-then what was left?

"If the rest of them are still out there, then they'll be back for revenge," Rum surmised.

"They shouldn't know the specifics of the deal, if you run away now you should be able to stay free," Rum's voice had an odd desperation to it. "No one will begrudge you for it. We're likely going to be wiped out anyways, everyone who can will be trying to flee in the next couple of days anyways."

"What about you?" Clarissa couldn't help but ask, her eyes widened in surprise.

"I doubt these old bones would make it without good preparation, I'll just have to wait and see. Perhaps the little witch sleeping in the other room will take care of the rest." Rum's wistfulness suggested he very much doubted that outcome.

"Get some rest, I'll wake you up if I need your help with the brat," his parting words said Rum made his way to his room leaving Clarissa alone to her thoughts.

Giving up on making sense of anything she made her way to the makeshift cot that had been made for when she needed to be around overnight to help out with medical emergencies. She curled up in herself and slowly drifted off to a fretful sleep.

It would be at the crack of dawn that the whole house would be awoken. An incredible racket was coming from outside, the sound of several people banging pots and pans together as loudly as they could.

"Bandit raid!" The groups' shouts echoed.

Clearly the retaliation that Rum had feared had arrived, albeit much faster than anticipated.

Afterword

First off I'm incredibly sorry about the long gap between updates. I got rather sick, not covid though, in December. Besides not being well I've been working 6 or 7 days a week. I had intended to get this out last Saturday but migraines said otherwise.

This chapter was a bit of a slough to write too. There's really that desire just have Subaru healed and move on, but dragging Emilia into the village is something that is absolutely pivotal. But at least Subaru is healed and we can move towards the end of the prologue. Most of the setup is done, so now the fun can start.

Fun fact: before adding in the title and going back for edits I ended the draft at 6,666 words long.

Another Fun Fact: I really could not come up with a name for Rum at first so I started trying to find a pattern in Re: Zero names, but couldn't really come up with anything. Then the thought that we have a Ram, Rem, and Rom crossed my mind. So clearly Rum and Rim are still missing. I'm not very good at naming things: Clarissa's name came from the thought that she would be a character seeking Clarity about what her divine protection is telling her and having a co-worker named Larissa. Boom name made, I just gave up and moved on.

***Chapter 8*: Chapter 8**

Chapter 8: The Fruits of Diligence

The sounds of crashing pans and shouts from the street tore Subaru from his slumber, as he awoke in a startled jolt. The jolt was intense enough that he might have jumped straight to his feet were there not a certain someone draped on top of him.

"You're being so noisy Subaru. Go back to sleep." Emilia's voice called out to him, slurred by sleep.

Subaru might have even been inclined to go along with it this time, if only he hadn't finally made out the words being shouted. But he had, and so he had to wake up Emilia, a task that was often, admittedly, quite difficult..

Gently shaking her shoulders, "Oi, you have to get up! It's an emergency."

Emilia slowly lifted up her head and opened her eyes. She cast a bleary-eyed gaze at Subaru, as she attempted to blink away the daze of sleep. At the end of a cat-like awakening stretch, Emilia paused in concern, her pointed ears having finally made out the warnings being shouted amongst all the commotion.

"Subaru do you think it's because I..." Emilia cast a nervous glance towards Subaru, having reached peak awareness surprisingly quickly after her realization.

"Maybe. The village gave up your location, so they might feel like they were set up. Honestly, they might not be wrong. As afraid of you as everyone is, the villagers might have expected you to take them out." Subaru, who was ever so slightly more worldly than Emilia, conjectured.

In the sequence of events that Subaru had postulated, it was clearly neither his or her fault nor was it his or her responsibility. If the two acted on that belief, they would not be wrong. This outcome was purely the result of the village trying to have two problems take care of each other. However, neither Emilia nor Subaru were the kind of people that could turn away from another's suffering. For Emilia, however, there was also a slightly more selfish motive: she did not wish to have another village's blood shed in her forest.

"Puck are you here?" Emilia called out.

There was, however, no answer. Puck had once again vanished to take care of something, and as usual he had left without warning. The fact that he had not given them any warning meant he had not intended to go very far away or be gone for very long. Emilia would just have to have faith that he would come as soon as he was able to.

As Emilia was about to run off to deal with things, Subaru grabbed her arm. He looked her in the eyes with a conviction that was uncharacteristic of his age.

"I'm not letting you go off on your own," there was a gentle firmness in Subaru's voice.

"But if I don't then-" Emilia's protest was cut off.

"I didn't say I was going to stop you, I just said I won't let you go alone," Subaru reassured.

"But Puck's not here, and you're still hurt," Emilia seemed almost frantic at letting anymore time pass without her helping out.

"Actually, I'm feeling fine, I don't hurt anywhere and my mana's full. Now calm down, this time let's think it through." Seeing Subaru's crooked grin calmed Emilia and caused the slightest, and ever so confusing, flutter in her chest.

"All right, now that you're not panicking how do we plan to stop them? I don't think either of us wants to kill them, but we already learned we can't just knock sense into them."

Subaru's question felt like a bucket of ice water being dumped over her head. If they just knocked out the offending mercenaries and left them, then they would just do something like this again; or perhaps even worse, they might catch them with yet another sneak attack. The thought of slaughtering them like the men she had killed yesterday, however, made her feel nauseous.

"Subaru what did they do with criminals in your world?" The faith and hope in Emilia's eyes and voice felt like the weight of the world to Subaru.

"Well, the police would hold them down, put them in handcuffs and take them to jail," Subaru droned off, trying to work out a plan.

"Handcuffs?"

"Yeah, they're these metal things that tie your hands together behind your back so you can't fight anymore," Subaru's explanation seemed to set off some sort of realization, as her eyes brightened.

"That's it! We can knock them out, tie them up with some rope, and drag them back to town." As Emilia pounded her fist into her palm in triumph, Subaru withheld the many objections he had; afterall, he didn't have a better idea.

There was, however, one problem that could not be left unaddressed, "Emilia where are we going to get rope?"

"We'll pick it up at the trading outpost, if they're not okay with that we'll pay later," Emilia's voice was eager, as she hurriedly brushed aside any objections.

Unable to think of a better plan, Subaru gave her a nod as they dashed out the door. Other than the few men running around town raising the alarm, the village appeared deserted for the most part. Every door they passed was locked shut, and every fire that would normally be visible was extinguished. Primarily operating on trade, very few of the town's inhabitants had much that they could use in the way of weaponry. In fact, the only reasonably armed people to be found were the very people sounding the alarm. Judging by the bows and daggers, Subaru assumed they must have been out hunting when they discovered the attack. It was on their way to the trading outpost that Subaru and Emilia crossed paths with said group once again.

"Excuse me," Subaru shouted trying to be heard over the ruckus they were making, "do you know which way they're coming from?"

As the small hunting party looked towards Subaru, they froze in their tracks, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say they froze when they caught sight of the person next to him. Stunned silent they gazed dumbly at the two of them. Surprisingly, it was Emilia herself who took charge and broke the silence.

"Please. We want to help. I don't want to see any more death in this forest." Emilia made a heartfelt entreaty, a gentle resolution in her eyes. A clenched hand fidgeting anxiously at chest height.

Unexpectedly, for the first time since she had thawed in the forest, she had gotten through to someone. Rather this time, she got through not to just a single person, but a group. An unreadable look in his eyes, the man standing in the front of the group stepped forward and held out his hand.

"If you're going to protect our town, we'll go with you," the man met Emilia's stunned eyes as he continued to hold out his proffered hand.

The very action stunned Emilia into a profound silence. The only sign left that she could still move was the ever so slight trembling of her body, as she stood perfectly still, eyes quivering in disbelief. Perhaps she might have even stood in that spot in that state all day, were it not for a hand gently coming to rest itself on her shoulder.

"I...I..." Emilia stammered as she tried to find any words in her head to reply with.

It was only a few seconds of this before that very same hand that had gently pushed her on from her shoulder, grasped her wrist and moved her hand into the villager's still outstretched hand. A gentle squeeze from both parties, and an unspoken understanding was borne. It was a solemn moment, without the need for words of acknowledgment-or so it would have been, had the grinning fool standing next to her, the very one who had made the whole event possible, not opened his mouth.

"It's great that you guys are helping, but we need to know where we're going and we need to get some rope," Subaru simultaneously ruined the moment and took charge.

The hunting party was indeed small, numbering four people in total. The equipment they possessed was equally underwhelming. The daggers they possessed would be of little use against a sword, and the short bows they were carrying would quickly become useless if they couldn't maintain a distance. Perhaps an even bigger problem was that Emilia, by far the strongest fighter amongst them, fought best at close range. If Emilia chose to engage up close then the bows would then be of little utility.

Had Subaru or Emilia been older or more experienced, they might have seen the lack of benefit of bringing such a group with them. Emilia and Subaru, however, had no idea what they were facing, and were pleasantly surprised to have any help. Even so, Emilia would not have had the heart to turn away a group of people who were genuinely reaching out to her in any circumstances.

One of the hunters standing back chose to speak up, "I've got some at my place that we can grab on the way."

The man was relatively young and of seemingly slight build. His uncertain brown eyes and slightly disheveled, short maroon hair gave off a somewhat doubtful air. However, the speed with which he turned the show the way betrayed any presumed timidity. Time being of the essence the party of six took off in a wordless run.

As Subaru dashed through the snow, he was struck by the errant thought that it was like he and Emilia had picked up four NPCs, and were now off to complete a compulsory quest. Subaru shook his head, as if to lose the thought behind him as they made haste. This wasn't a game, it was a harsh world that had nearly taken his life several times. If he and Emilia managed to succeed and fulfill the role of the hero, his only reward would be Emilia's smile. Surprisingly, the reward didn't seem unfair at all to Subaru.

Subaru had slothfully ran and hid from his problems in his old world. Getting good grades was hard, so he stopped caring about them. Being a top athlete seemed impossible, so he gave up. He couldn't make friends, so he made a fool of himself. It was only here, in a fantasy world, that Subaru had been able to experience the fulfillment borne of diligence. Afterall, at his core Subaru was not a slothful person. Rather right now, standing next to his first real friend, Subaru felt unstoppable.

Before long the group came to a stop at a non-descript house. The man who had led them bolted inside, hopping on one leg as he tripped on his doorstep in a frenzied rush. A crash and several thuds later, he came back out a bit bruised but with a long roll of rope. He held it out to Emilia, a slightly nervous look on his face.

"Ah thanks..." Emilia trailed off.

"Laurence. I'm Laurence. If you don't mind...why do you need rope?"

"Well, I don't want to hurt them too badly, so Subaru decided we'd knock them out, tie them up, and drag them to town." Laurence was driven speechless by the naive and innocent reasoning.

"Are you sure about that? They're likely going to be out for blood, you need to take them seriously."

Emilia turned a surprisingly piercing gaze toward Laurence, "I am."

"As long as Subaru and I stay together it'll be fine this time," Laurence averted his gaze unwilling to meet the intensity in Emilia's eyes.

It was a short time later on that the group stood waiting on the path that the mercenaries were expected to arrive. The fear that Subaru was expecting to feel was nowhere to be found. A glance at the silver-haired half-elf next to him was all he needed to feel invincible. Someone needed him; someone had expectations of him. He had no choice but to answer them. Furthermore, for the first time he had a leg up on his competition; he could use magic no matter how basic. As long as they didn't split up, there's no way this encounter would end up like last time.

A thought struck Subaru, "How are we sure they're going to come down this road? Wouldn't criminals rather sneak in?"

"Not around here. There's no real law enforcement out by us, and they were bringing a couple dragon carriages. This is meant to be a show of force before they loot us."

The answer from the presumptive leader of the group of hunters disturbed Subaru. Just what kind of lord must these lands have to let such a situation go on? A glance around at the area revealed a relatively flat region with a well-traveled road. It appeared that the raiding party intended to enter and leave as easily as if they were a group of traveling merchants. Subaru took a calming breath trying to sooth his righteous indignation. Subaru needed to be in control; he wanted to incapacitate with Minya, not kill.

Before long a caravan of six total carriages traveling in two rows emerged from the forest path. The amount of men riding in or walking along those carriages was quite sizeable, by Subaru's estimation there must have been near one-hundred men in total. As the six people who had set out to defend the village gazed onwards in shock, a lone crossbow-bolt came flying across the field. Subaru's eyes clearly traced the path of the bolt as it was effortlessly snatched into Emilia's hand. A cold gaze in her normally warm eyes, she snapped it in the middle with an understated squeeze before dropping it.

A brief moment of focus later and Emilia handed Subaru a makeshift iceshield. Holding on to it, Subaru felt surprisingly safe. For some reason that bolt had seemed to travel unusually slowly, and while he didn't think he could catch it, he was strangely confident he would have no trouble blocking one.

Between the unexpectedly overwhelming numbers and the incongruent sight of Emilia snatching a crossbow bolt out of the air, the four that had accompanied them were stricken silent and left unmoving. The courage they'd shown up to now had evaporated immediately, and had left behind a numb terror. The cause behind this was simple, when they'd spotted the group in the forest there had been a mere two carriages perhaps 15 or so men. Having figured that the witch herself could easily take out ten or so they had had confidence that the fight wasn't unwinnable. But against a force a hundred strong or more, the four hunters believed that they had no chance of victory.

Such a large group had been formed by the convergence of several separate groups. It was merely good fortune that said groups chose to converge and attack from the same point. Had they done so the groups attacking from different paths would have had an uncontested moment of pillage as Emilia and Subaru fought elsewhere.

Glancing back at their now useless companions Emilia and Subaru gave each other a silent nod before taking off in a sprint. Subaru found himself running at speeds that made his eyes widen comically in surprise, his gate open and functioning correctly was now properly saturating his body in mana. He could feel the warmth of his mana spreading out gently from his gate, seemingly supercharging his very being. At once Puck's comments about using mana to strengthen himself made sense, it was the kind of sensation that once he'd experienced it, he couldn't help but do it. It was almost as if some part of him had always known how to commit this very act.

As Subaru shook off the intoxicating sensation of the strength rushing through him he glanced over towards Emilia. Emilia cast a faint, proud smile towards Subaru, as she checked to make sure he was keeping up. Subaru grinned to himself, believing just this once that he was someone worth being proud of.

Outstretching her hand Emilia chanted, "Huma!"

From her outstretched hand a modestly sized spear of ice launched forth. Aimed toward the wheels of the leftmost row of carriages, her projectile sailed forth, completely dewatering that side of every carriage lined up. The shattered wood shattered and shot about as shrapnel impaling a couple of the mercenaries who had been standing around in inaction shocked by the sudden assault on their position. As the damaged sides of the carriages collapsed to the ground, the shifting of the passengers gave resounding thuds, the startled grunts of the misplaced passengers following soon after. The ground dragons futilely continued attempting to pull and push onwards but gave up as they succeeded in little more than digging a hole in the ground they stood upon.

Subaru went to follow up Emilia's act, but before he could cast a spell he noticed a volley of arrows coming in from the rear of the battalion. His initial fear was quickly overwhelmed by the heady confidence bursting forth at his new abilities.

"Subaru!" Emilia cried out trying to run towards him to intercept the incoming arrows.

But her concerns were quickly shown baseless as Subaru easily tracked and batted aside the incoming volley. A quick minya later and Subaru's shadow spear had disabled the other half of the carriages. A pained whail could be heard in the distance, but Subaru and Emilia paid it little heed.

"Don't worry Emilia! Today I'm feeling divinely inspired."

"Divinely inspired?"

"What else could I feel charging into battle with an angel at my side?"

Her cheeks stained a deep red Emilia sputtered, "Subaru, you, you, jobbernow!"

Subaru's usual retorts to Emilia's antiquated language were preempted by a sudden charge of swordsmen storming towards Subaru. As Subaru's Minya's struck true, the attacking swordsmen were temporarily petrified by crystallized mana as they collapsed. Or at least all but one were downed.

The lone swordsman who had been spared Subaru's counterattack raised his sword. The glint of the sun as it refracted off of the tip of the blade, induced a phantom pain as Subaru recalled the sensation of a blade slicing at his neck. Stricken by panic, Subaru aimlessly struck out with his right fist, and succeeded in landing a blow straight across his assailant's left cheek. The swordsman's body was launched backwards a couple meters as several teeth were liberated from his jaw by the force of Subaru's haphazard strike. His body fell bonelessly, having been knocked out by the sensation of his jaw shattering and the whiplash of his sudden launching.

Calming his fear-induced gasps Subaru gazed about his surroundings. There were no more mercenaries left standing. In the time that he had taken down one or two dozen men, Emilia had already disabled the remainder of the hundred or so men. In a way,

Subaru thought his victims had been the lucky ones given that he had been using Minya to petrify, Emilia's opponent had been taken down with brute force. Many of Emilia's victims were on the ground writhing in pain, they would need to act fast to immobilize the ones that were still conscious.

Subaru turned back towards the group they had brought with them. At some point the group had shaken off their shock and notched arrows in their bows which they were now slowly lowering in stunned disbelief. As strange as it was to think, Emilia and Subaru had taken down the entire group in the span of a minute or so; between that and given how quickly the two had run in, the four hunters had never had a chance to participate. Or at least they hadn't until this moment, Subaru decided.

"Hey! Can you guys come here and help us tie them up?" Subaru beckoned at the top of his lungs. While waiting for them to bring the rope, Subaru noticed Emilia practically charging at him. Emilia grabbed onto Subaru's shoulders and yanked him around, as she frantically inspected his body.

"You're okay, right? Nothing happened to you, did it?" Emilia frantically fretted over Subaru, inspecting each and every inch of him.

"Emilia, I'm fine. It seems somehow I leveled up over night, so it wasn't a big deal." Subaru assured her.

"Leveled up?" Emilia tilted her head to the side.

"In games when you do enough stuff, you suddenly get stronger. We call that leveling up." Subaru explained.

"It wasn't really that sudden though. I used to have to be soooo gentle when I was playing with you, and lately I don't have to worry that much. Although seeing you run that fast was a bit surprising." Emilia innocently struck below the belt in what she thought was well intentioned praise.

Subaru had noticed that he hadn't had to warn her about overdoing it much at all lately. He'd assumed she was getting better at controlling her strength, and she probably was. But apparently whatever happened today, had been happening this whole time.

The soft crunching of snow being crushed underfoot announced the arrival of their companions. Somewhat pensive looks adorned their faces as they closed the gap. After an exchanged glance, Laurence stepped forward a thoroughly uncomfortable grimace on his face.

A few seconds of awkward silence and Laurence finally found his voice, "I'm sorry."

He swallowed audibly before continuing, "There's no way we can take these men prisoner as a village."

"But, you can't just let them loose!" Subaru shouted in objection.

"No, we can't. For criminals too dangerous to be allowed to be free, there is only one punishment. Especially in a village like ours where we don't even have food for a single extra person."

"You liar!" Emilia roared, the corner of her eyes glistening.

"You knew that we didn't want to kill them. You went along with our plan...and now you...now you..." Emilia's speech became stilted before being silenced all together by sobs.

"Just this once...I wanted to end things without hurting or killing anyone," Emilia's voice as faint as the turn of a gentle breeze.

"If suffering is the only thing I can bring, then maybe I am a witch."

Subaru roughly wrapped his around her shoulder and yanked her body flush to his side, "Come on, whatever happens is on them."

The village hunters watched on silently as Emilia and Subaru turned away from them. The silence and inaction partially driven by fear, and partly driven by the desire to not have two children bear witness to a mass execution.

Moving his arm off his shoulder he grasped her hand and started guiding her as he walked into the forest. As Subaru walked past the wreckage they had lain, he noticed a particularly mauled body. The mercenary's chest had been completely run through, and around the wound was purple petrified flesh. This person had been killed by Minya. This person had been killed by Subaru.

Immediately Subaru's stomach clenched, as he fell to his knees. A burning sensation danced across his cheeks, as his upper body shook violently as he began to heave. Dropped to a tripod position, Subaru vomited as his eyes watered. Subaru wanted to yell, scream, shout but the only thing that would come out of his mouth were his stomach contents.

"Subaru!" Emilia quickly crouched next Subaru both hands firmly on his shoulders keeping him from collapsing face first into the snow.

"Emili-aagh," Subaru's attempt to talk was immediately cut off by a round of dry heaving.

Unsure what else to do Emilia gently rubbed Subaru's back. A few spasms later, it seemed that his body had finally accepted that there was nothing left to expel. He leaned heavily on Emilia as he forced his quivering body back to its feet.

Wordlessly, a pair of crying children entered the forest leaning on each other. The fruit of their diligent efforts to save a village with no casualties were one-hundred soon to be dead bodies. Of course the other fruit would be a legend: the tale of the kind witch and warlock who guarded the Ellior Forest and the towns surrounding it, who had wept even the deaths of murderers. But more importantly, tales of an elven girl with silver hair and amethyst eyes would spread well beyond the forest. Thus began the tale of the Witch of Frost and the Warlock of Shadows.

Afterword

Sorry for the long wait for such a short chapter, the delay was a combination of real life getting in the way, and this being one of those chapters where the words just don't want to come out. Honestly I don't know if I'll have more or less time to write going forward. I ended up leaving a job as a formulation chemist that I was rather unhappy at right at the start of covid(arranged the departure months before covid was a thing). Ended up unemployed for a while before getting a temp job working 6-7 days a week as a covid screener. I've finally found a real job now as a regulatory affairs specialist for product chemistry submissions of crop protection products, so I'm back to a normal 8-5 now but I did do a bit of writing in the down times at the temp job.

Anyways we've wrapped up the prologue. A couple interlude chapters and we'll move on to this story's first actual arc. This chapter was a bittersweet taste of strength for Subaru, and perhaps a first look into just how naive and immature Subaru and Emilia are. You'll notice that a lot of their actions don't make a ton of sense. Of course a village that's struggling to get by couldn't support 100 prisoners (execution is kinder than starving them to death). Subaru charging an armed battalion head on is just plain silly, yes with minya he wins the one on one but swords and arrows still could kill him. A lot of things are converging with positive consequences for Subaru: he hasn't damaged his gate, he's learned to draw mana from his gate and has begun to adapt to it, and his connection to Emilia is doing something. As he is now, he's significantly stronger than the average adult, but by the standards of the powerful in the re: zero verse he is still utterly insignificant.

In a way you could think of this story as a Diligence IF, guided by a virtue rather than a sin. It's more than Subaru exhibiting this virtue that made this reality happen too. Just some food to think on.

***Chapter 9*: Chapter 9**

Interlude 1: It's Too Late For Regrets

Emilia gazed down warmly on Subaru's tear-stained face, having finally cried himself to sleep and collapsed onto her lap. Seeking to ease his restless sleep, she gently stroked his hair. A wan smile gently carved its way across her statuesque visage as his face loosened ever so slightly. Being the heavy sleeper that she had always been, Emilia had never truly had the chance to observe just how defenseless Subaru appeared when asleep. A bewildering whirl of haphazard, confused thoughts and relief writhed about in the pit of her stomach.

Subaru had always seemed like a force of nature to her, fearlessly facing everything with a grin twisting his face. A part of her that she oh-so-vehemently detested had envied that strength, and now that loathsome part of herself was relieved to see a weak side to Subaru. The frosty chill of self-hatred nipped at her heart, as the blaze of an unfamiliar wrath was kindled in her gut. If those awful men hadn't attacked her or the village, Subaru wouldn't be hurting. If Pandora hadn't sought the seal, Mother Fortuna would still be with her. The world kept taking or harming what was Emilia's, and she was sick of it; she was enraged by it.

Emilia hadn't wanted to kill the village's assailants, but as it was now, she found it hard to care too much about their fate. Their wickedness had led them to the grave, and her Subaru had been hurt as a result. She didn't wish harm on anyone, but if they were to lay a hand on Subaru, she would unflinchingly slaughter them. Mother Fortuna had called her a crybaby as she bled out-it was time to grow up. If the world was insisting on turning her kindness into violent ends, then it was time to stop bawling her eyes out as she watched it happen.

Subaru was a kind boy; she didn't want to see him tainted as she had been. Only she needed to hold this rage. Only she needed to dirty her hands. So long as he was by her side, filling her days with warmth, she would be fine. Of that alone, she had no doubt.

"Thank you sooo much for everything, Subaru," Emilia whispered as she gently wiped the remaining tears from his eyes. "I promise that I won't let something like this happen again."

As Subaru rested peacefully in her lap, she resisted the urge to gently pinch his cheek. Now that he had calmed down, she couldn't help but find his defenseless figure adorable. She couldn't find it in her heart to move him, so she let him nap on her lap. It wasn't but thirty minutes into her silent vigil that she too dozed off, sitting straight up on the bed with Subaru still slumbering on her lap.

It would be an hour later that a frantic cat found his way to the two slumbering children. While he was relieved to see them fine, the pair's red, puffy eyelids gave away the fact that they'd been crying. The nagging feeling that something was off ate at him as he furrowed his furry eyebrows. Suddenly it struck him: he'd gotten them a baby-sitter-a baby-sitter that was nowhere to be found.

Setting aside his concerns about the missing baby-sitter, Puck gave the children a quick inspection. Satisfied that they were at least uninjured, Puck decided to leave them slumber as he investigated what had happened while he had been gone. Puck's face twisted in discontent; the thought of leaving Subaru to enjoy a lap pillow from his precious Lia made his stomach twitch with a violent nausea-he'd thought that he'd had a few more years before he had to worry about boys. Puck had thought that mortals didn't get interested in *those* kinds of things until about thirteen or fourteen years old, but he had been a spirit for a long time-perhaps his perception was distorted. It wasn't that Puck had anything particularly against Subaru, but Lia was a few hundred years too young for any fraternization-she was a pure maiden, and he intended to keep it that way.

The sight as a whole was beyond infuriating to Puck. Puck had viewed allowing Subaru to stay as giving Lia a toy or pet-something to make her smile. Smiling, cheerful, and pure: that was how his Lia should be. Instead, Subaru had changed his precious daughter; Subaru had slowly been taking her away. Right before Puck's eyes was evidence that Subaru had made her cry. Even more annoying, the smiles she gave Subaru were so much more vibrant than he had ever seen from her.

Puck could hardly recognize Emilia as she was now. She was headstrong, optimistic, and many days almost carefree. His Lia had been, and always should have remained: demure, fastidious, and diligent. Like a drop of poison, a poison ever so gentle, Subaru had tainted her and in doing so stripped Puck of the girl that he had yearned for for four-hundred years.

Puck had devoted his very being for this girl, and now this brat in nary a few weeks had usurped his spot as her most precious person. Puck may have been around her for longer, but measured in time spent together Subaru had long since surpassed Puck. Puck could bring a light chuckle or faint smile to her face if he joked around, but Subaru could light her face up in an overjoyed beam almost effortlessly. She practically fawned over the boy, and every day it ate at him more and more.

The chilling sensation of his magic rushed through Puck's body, a reminder of how easily the blight before him could be removed. But, Puck could not do it. If something happened to Subaru, Lia would break. Puck had let Subaru into Lia's life, and in doing so he would lose her. It was too late for regrets.

Puck shook off the icy rage threatening to overtake his senses. He had someone with deeper sins to go after, Subaru at least always tried to do his job. Letting out a deep sigh, Puck set out to investigate what had happened and to retrieve his errant baby-sitter.

Fading away towards the village, Puck popped back into his corporeal form about 500 paces outside of the village. Echoing footsteps, crunching as someone tread upon the snow, reached Puck's ears as they flicked up. Making her way towards him, waddling desperately whilst gasping for air, was a familiar cat-eared girl, burdened by a backpack bulging at its seams. As Clarissa's gaze caught Puck, she stopped and took a sigh of relief.

"Have you seen Subaru or Emilia?" Clarissa's breathless question bespoke her haste to find the pair in question.

Taking in her pitiable state, Puck's stern expression lightened ever so slightly, "They're back home, asleep but fine."

Puck left an oppressive silence dangling as Clarissa drew in a relieved sigh, "That's good to hear," she murmured. "I'd heard that Subaru was throwing up after the fight-I was worried that he might have aggravated his injury."

"About that," Puck's eyes narrowed threateningly as he pressed, "what fight did they get in exactly?"

Her ears fell flat to her head as the hairs on her tail stood on end. Mustering all of her courage, tempering the urge to hiss and flee, she shakily answered, "They ran off a bandit raid. The stories say they disabled over a hundred men."

Puck's face slowly lost its tension as the icy aura around him let up slightly. As he prepared to further his interrogation, an oddity stood out to him.

"They?"

"Umm...yes. I was told that Subaru took out a couple dozen men himself." Clarissa managed to stutter out her answer. If Puck heard her mutter, "I'm not sure if I believe it," he didn't give any indication.

Eyes widened ever so slightly, Puck gave off the impression that he was at best mildly surprised. Something about his demeanor unsettled Clarissa.

"You don't seem all that surprised," she gently probed.

"I knew he was capable, but I was pretty sure he was too spineless to do it. Normal soldiers are no threat to them if they harden themselves, but they're both soft idiots. Perfectly fine and normal for a wonderful girl like my Lia, but it's what makes Subaru pitiful. The role of the man is to be the strong one, and he can't fill that role."

"But...then...why..." Clarissa was dazed at Puck's sudden dismissal of Subaru.

"Don't misunderstand, I don't dislike Subaru-he makes Lia happy. But if I leave Lia to him she'll be sullied and dirtied. Tears, strife, anger...none of that should be her role. Subaru keeps letting her cry-as happy as he makes her, letting them be together was a mistake. So I had hoped that you could keep them out of trouble when I'm away." Puck's diatribe was neither warm nor cold, but the tone of a frustrated father.

"You talk about her as if she were a doll," there was a biting edge in her whisper, so faint it was almost lost in the rustle of the drifting snow.

"She's my treasure. I'll protect her. I'll keep her safe. I'll keep her untainted." A chilling anger prickled underneath Puck's conviction.

Clarissa gazed upon Puck as if seeing him for the first time. What she saw wasn't love-it wasn't protectiveness-but the colors of obsession and possessiveness. Perhaps Puck had loved Emilia, but now the idea of loving Emilia, the ideal that Emilia represented, had become his everything. Puck's colors, which had been muddled to her divine protection, were now clear to her. Ever since her conversation with Rim, her sight had grown more vivid than ever before.

"Not once did you say you'd keep her happy," uncharacteristic boldness overran her fear as her softly uttered rebuttal resounded heavily.

"If I keep her safe, if I keep her untainted, then one day she'll be happy," Puck growled, but the hesitation on his face suggested that not even he was convinced by his assertion.

"So you'll use a boy who looks up to you as nothing but a tool to keep that Emilia safe."

"Exactly! Emilia is my everything. I won't accept a world without her. I won't accept a world where Emilia is no longer my Emilia. That boy is a poison to her: he's brought her tears, he's taught her sadness, he's taught her anger. Because of him, because of his uselessness, she's losing her innocence." Calm anger bubbled forth from within Puck.

"So what, you'll eliminate Subaru to keep your Emilia as she was?" Clarissa practically hissed, her fangs poking out.

"It's too late for that now-it's too late for regrets. If anything happens to Subaru, Lia will break. That's why I thought to use you to keep them out of trouble, and now I want to know: where were you today?" All pretense was gone as Puck's eyes aggressively narrowed in on the girl before him.

"I was fast asleep after looking after Subaru all night; by the time I was up and moving they'd already gone off to play hero. I spent most of today frantically trying to find where they went." Clarissa's hiss intensified the longer the conversation stretched.

Normally she would have cowered in the face of the spirit's rage; she'd spent her whole life cowering. The last week, however, had made it clear to her that there were fates worse than death. If she was going to die, she was going to at least choose how she died. Clarissa refused to die a coward; she'd already resolved to kill herself rather than endure her captivity-dying while standing up for the only two people to have shown her unconditional kindness in her life seemed glamorous in comparison. The feeling was

liberating-it was here, facing down certain death, that she felt alive for the first time in her life. She had the distinct feeling that if she could look into her own soul at this very moment, she might just like what she saw now.

"Everyone is useless!" Puck raged in a frozen fury.

"Then why weren't you there? If you care so much about her safety, why don't you protect her?" The slits in her eyes bore into Puck.

"I can't! If I could, I would!" Puck roared.

"How convenient for you! You get to run away from all the responsibility and pin all the blame on everyone else!" Her voice was a shrill rasp at the end.

"Really? So, finding one of the few healers in the world I can trust with Lia and cultivating the talent of perhaps the only one her age who would be her friend is running from my responsibility? Make no mistake: I'd sooner end the world than let her be taken away. Perhaps a child like you won't be able to understand yet, or perhaps you never will. As you are now, I can tell that death wouldn't even be a punishment."

"So, why tell me all this?" Her whisper carried strongly on the wind.

"I need to get the only disposable tool available to me, in hand. Losing you wouldn't break Lia. You will keep those two idiots out of trouble." Puck bluntly laid out his intentions.

"And if I were to think of you as the biggest danger to them?"

"Then, I'd say I look forward to working with you," Puck retorted with a fanged grin.

Puck floated off angrily, unwilling to speak anymore. In a short month Puck had watched three people transform in what were, to him, nigh incomprehensible ways. To Puck who had spent four-hundred years unchanging, fixated on a single goal, a month was a blink of an eye. Surely people couldn't change in a blink. But they had, and he found it incredibly difficult to accept. At some level the true source of Puck's anger wasn't just the loss, but that Subaru and Clarissa's criticisms had hit home. His four-hundred years of idle fixation felt practically slothful now, and he still couldn't change. Perhaps on that alone, it might not be too late for regrets yet.

Afterword: The first interlude, and admittedly a short one is done. A couple more in between chapters and we can move on to the next bit of the story. There are some distinct parallels drawn between Puck and another character, I think Puck and that other character would be quite insulted to be considered similar. A lot of readers have wondered about Puck's thoughts on various things, and here they end up laid bare in a surprisingly child-like tantrum (although Puck does seem prone to those when things go wrong). The next bit will contain a scene I've been intending to write since the start, I think everyone will find it quite amusing.

***Chapter 10*: Chapter 10**

Interlude 2: So THAT'S Where Babies Come From?!

Something profoundly uncommon had occurred: Emilia was awake before Subaru. To be more precise, it seemed that the sun had also missed the memo. Emilia, however, didn't have any question why she had awoken. Clearly it was the eldritch affliction that had taken hold inside of her the last couple days. Furthering her intemperate indignation was her inability to even quite say just where exactly she was hurting; it wasn't a stomach ache-even if her stomach did hurt sometimes-but rather some abominable malady made her some part of her that she had no idea how to name twist in agony. She'd almost swear there was some wicked creature writhing about inside her mangling her from within.

She had, of course, said nothing to Subaru about this. He'd already been out of sorts for the last couple of days-it felt oddly condemning how much more bothered he was than her over the deaths of the men who had attacked the village. Still it was both relief and vexation to see him sleeping so soundly. She was overjoyed to finally see him sleeping peacefully again-she really was-but the urge to scream at the injustice of the situation clawed at her throat. Slumbering solemnly-Subaru was completely, nay blissfully, unwitting of the fiendish agony besieging her. She hugged on to Subaru just a bit more tightly, as something squeezed ever so painfully inside of her.

Riding out the latest wave of whatever was happening to her, she came to the realization that her undergarments felt damp. Pouting at the indignation of having possibly done something as childish as wetting herself, she listlessly peeled herself out of bed. Her vision still blurred slightly by the haze of sleep, she clumsily ambled about-the silver moonlight languidly beaming down through her window being her only guide.

As she pulled off the soiled undergarments she noticed something-the liquid soaking them was red. Her clothing was soaked in blood. One hand on her chest, she forced herself to take deep breaths as her eyes widened in alarm. She couldn't help an errant thought from sprinting across her mind-was she dying? Bleeding, especially down there, couldn't be okay, could it?

Hurriedly she swapped clothes quickly, her heart fluttering away in her chest. With trembling arms she, not all that gently, shook Subaru awake. Subaru was startled awake to meet Emilia's watery, panicked eyes nary a nose's length away.

"Something's wrong! My stomach reeeaaally hurts, and I'm bleeding a looot." Emilia had barely gotten the words out, before Subaru had jumped up and gently wrapped his arms around her trembling form.

Cheeks and ears alight, she resisted the token urge to protest, as she clung onto Subaru. Subaru wasted neither time nor words as he dashed out the door, hoisting her clumsily in his arms. His destination was clear.

In the aftermath of the bandit raid, Clarissa had returned with what few worldly possessions she owned and a few tokens of apology stowed in a backpack. As a group they had prepared one of the nearby homes as a place for her-Emilia's house really didn't have the room for three people. In such circumstances, the only sensible option had been to fix up a place to live. A decision Subaru felt grateful for given that it meant they had a healer nearby.

In what couldn't have been more than a minute or two Subaru was at Clarissa's front door. Without wasting a single second, he began to frantically pound on the door with such force that knuckle shaped indents were left behind.

"Something's wrong with Emilia! It's an emergency!" Subaru's face was dyed a faint red from the intensity of his shout.

Half a minute or so of pounding later, and the door was flung open from the inside. Subaru barely managed to retract his fist, and avoid punching the one who had opened it.

"What's wrong?" Clarissa practically yawned, her eyes still half-lidded.

Despite the speed with which she had responded, much of her body's mannerisms suggested that she wasn't quite awake. Her ears drooped limply, as if too bothered to stand at attention, whilst her eyes remained half lidded. Her fangs leisurely poked out as her mouth widened in a yawn that stretched her whole body all the way to the curling of the tip of her tail.

"Well um...my stomach hurts a looooot and I'm bleeding," Emilia's face was faintly red all the way to the tips of her ears as she meekly uttered the problem.

Clarissa's eyes suddenly sharpened with focus, "And just where is the bleeding?" she asked.

Emilia shuffled left and right uncomfortably, the rosiness coloring her cheeks growing ever deeper, "It's...you know...down there..." she muttered, her face downturned.

"Is this the normal time of month for you?" Clarissa asked, a calm sigh loosening her serious face..

"Normal? Time of the month?" Emilia's eyebrows furrowed in confusion, as her head tilted to the side.

Biting her cheeks in frustration, "Of course he wouldn't have told her anything," Clarissa berated Emilia's guardian spirit.

Indeed Puck often went out of his way to shelter Emilia, and even in just around a week of acquaintance she could presume that such a conversation had never occurred. Steadying herself with a suffering breath, she turned towards Subaru.

"Subaru. Can you wait out here for a bit? This is going to be a bit of a personal checkup."

His own face flushed and eyes cast sideways he answered, "Sure."

A short exam later Clarissa was forced to sit Emilia down for a very important life discussion. A rather uncomfortable one that only she could give at the moment. Puck wouldn't, and it would be rather unreasonable to ask Subaru to attempt it, if he even knew everything in the first place.

"So while a fair bit worse than usual, what is happening to you right now is a normal bodily process that happens once a month, although I'm not exactly sure if that will remain true for half-elves."

"You mean that...bleeding like this is normal?" Emilia's voice hitched in fright as she asked the question.

"Well it's usually nowhere near as bad as this, but you've had a rough time lately so this might be a one time thing," Clarissa softened her tone into her best attempt at reassurance.

"Oh," Emilia did not appear particularly reassured, her head downturned as she shuffled her feet restlessly.

"Emilia, you DO know where babies come from, right?"

"Um, they come from kissing, right?" Emilia brought her fingers to her lips seemingly confused about the topic shift.

Clarissa's eyes widened in surprise, "And did you happen to hear this from someone?"

It was after all completely possible for a kid to come to such a conclusion on her own. But the relative certainty with which Emilia said it suggested otherwise. It was time to find out if she possibly had two confused children on her hands.

"Puck did. I asked where babies came from, and he told me about how dangerous letting boys kiss me would be—he told me right after Subaru arrived."

She really didn't know what else she suspected. Puck seemed to do his best to shelter her, so that he hadn't explained properly made sense. Would a spirit even be aware of the fact that Emilia's body would soon be going through changes, and the need for her to understand that? Or for that matter would a spirit even understand the odd desires that teenagers would begin to feel? Perhaps it was better that she be the one to explain, lest Emilia begin to feel, or be told, that these feelings and changes were some sort of sinful urge to be repressed.

"That's not how things work. This is going to be an uncomfortable talk, but there are things you need to know."

Subaru's face was bright red as he fidgeted anxiously outside. Clawing roughly at his hair, he looked up to the sky.

"I'm such an idiot," he howled.

He'd gotten so worked up over nothing, if he'd have stopped to think for a minute he'd have realized that it was probably no big deal. But the very instant Emilia's amethyst eyes had dampened he'd sprung into action. It was like he was some besotted fool slobbering after a girl. Subaru was absolutely not into girls; not even a little bit. Even if his best friend was super awesome, really nice, and breathtakingly pretty. If Subaru was interested in girls-and Subaru absolutely wasn't-Emilia would totally be his type. But since Subaru wasn't into that stuff he didn't have to worry about it-not that an absolute angel like Emilia would be interested in him.

Subaru roughly shook his head to clear his thoughts. For perhaps the first time since he arrived in this world he gazed up at the sky. He couldn't find any of the constellations he knew, he couldn't even find Polaris the northern star. No big or little dipper, much less the Pleiades constellation. It really raised the question to Subaru: was he in a different dimension or a different part of the universe? Maybe both?

A slight melancholy overtook Subaru at the thought that his parents were looking up at a different sky. In an odd way, if only the constellation of his namesake were there Subaru thought that his family wouldn't feel as far away.

Letting his gaze drift across the sky he found a group of stars with a passing resemblance to a face. The ears he could make from the stars were rather pointy-just like a certain someone. Taking it in a slight, wan smile softened his face. Even if he might never talk to his parents again, even if the stars from his old world weren't looking down on him anymore-he wasn't alone.

"He puts it in down there!?" A normally bell-like voice shrilly squeaked, clearly audible even outside.

A bright flush encompassed Subaru's face, as his suspicions were confirmed. They were indeed having THAT conversation.

The appa-red flush of embarrassment had long finished conquering Emilia's face, and had engaged in a blitzkrieg down her ears. Her eyes were wide, in what would pass as fear to an uninformed observer.

"Wou-wouldn't that reeeally hurt?" Emilia's face was turned downwards as she inspected her legs as they kicked back and forth in unease.

Clarissa's breath hitched as her eyes hardened ever so slightly. Her tail went rigid, as she forcibly held back her response.

"The first time will always hurt a bit, but after that it shouldn't be painful as long as the guy takes care. You should only let someone who's very special to you, that you absolutely trust, do these things with you." Clarissa did her best to keep her voice level, and the slight wavering went unnoticed to the otherwise occupied Emilia.

"I-I-I don't think Subaru wants to do anything li-like that," Emilia fumbled out in a rapid fire stutter.

"It might not be Subaru. This is something that should be left for the man you'll marry. You might find someone who means more to you at some point."

The doubtful gaze Emilia cast her way, did not give Clarissa the impression that Emilia believed her. Then again, it was hard to convince someone of something you didn't believe yourself. Even to her eyes the two were clearly smitten with each other, and were only a couple years away from marrying age. Still Emilia shouldn't assume that that was how things had to go—puppy love doesn't always grow up.

"How do you know who to marry?" Emilia's voice was hesitant, as if ashamed of the question.

"Ideally you'd marry someone you love, trust, and find attractive," Clarissa's voice also wavered with doubt, after all she herself had never known love.

"And...what does it mean to be in love?" Emilia's eyes met Clarissa's with an inquisitive firmness.

"I...it's..." Clarissa fumbled for words, visibly flustered.

"It'd be when being with each other makes you happy. When you care deeply about each other and don't want to be parted." Clarissa spoke with the naivety of a maiden's heart.

Emilia nodded, a gentle, fond smile gracing her face. It really was much more simple than she'd thought it'd be. Honestly, Fortuna and Geuse had made it seem so~ complicated. All that, "no I couldn't" and "I've known her since she was young" nonsense.

"Honestly some of the stuff you ask about, I wonder how you even get your hair done in the morning," Clarissa teased lightheartedly.

"Subaru does it for me. He's really gentle combing it for me, so it feels nice and he's really good at getting all the knots out." Emilia admitted with matter of fact sincerity, not realizing the rhetorical nature of the jest.

Clarissa was taken aback but not surprised. Despite her first impression that Emilia was taking care of Subaru, in the few weeks she'd known them many of the more mundane aspects of life were managed by Subaru. It was generally Subaru who got Emilia up in the morning, Subaru that made her go play and not clean the statues and draw a map all day, and Subaru who insisted that they eat three well-balanced meals a day. To add grooming on top of that was not too surprising. Honestly, the two of them were a pair of mother hens unfit to take care of themselves.

"Anyways that's enough for tonight. You know what's happening to your body and how babies are made. Just do what I told you to manage the blood." Another fang-baring yawn capped off her intent to wrap up the night's conversation.

With sudden apprehension, Emilia set out the door to be greeted by an equally red-faced Subaru. The redness on his face could only mean one thing—he'd figured out what they were talking about.

"Su-su-shubaru!" Emilia looked almost as if steam might start coming out her ears.

"Are you okie?" Subaru asked his gaze averted to the side.

"I'm o-okie," Emilia stuttered, her face now lobster red.

She instinctively reached out to take Subaru's hand before nervously pulling it back. Emilia was worried she'd never be able to look at Subaru the same again, he was a boy after all. He must have known all this time too—Puck as well! They'd been trying to get her to sleep in a separate bed back at the start, and the stuff she'd been told HAD to be the reason.

"I...I'm okay let's just go back," Emilia haltingly uttered.

And so they set off, in a silence that had never existed between the two of them before now. It was an embarrassed rather than uncomfortable quiet. The crunches in the snow being their only companion on their moonlit trek.

"I-I think, we should sleep separately from now on," Emilia timidly suggested, breaking the silence.

"Y-Yeah, that's why I was trying to convince you at the start, you know the stuff with boys and girls," Subaru fumbled his way through the sentence staring firmly at his shoes.

Before long they made it back home and Subaru laid out the bedding that had been abandoned before. As he collapsed down on it, Emilia had a somewhat sheepish look on her face.

"I feel bad making you sleep on the floor all the time, maybe we should take turns..." Emilia pondered.

"Nah, it's fine. Not any worse than sleeping on a tatami mat." Subaru cast her a comforting grin.

Emilia looked as if she were about to argue before another round of cramps silenced her unspoken thoughts. Throwing herself in bed, she writhed and groaned. Seeing that she was in mood to talk at the moment Subaru bid her good night and promptly fell into slumber.

Emilia found herself alone—in a cold bed with nothing but her thoughts and a horrible ache. Frankly, it felt strange now—troubling even. The one thing she'd learned since Subaru came into her life was that she didn't want to be alone. She thought she'd grown used to it, but all it took was a couple friends to shatter the resistance she'd built up in this forest. Everything had been so much simpler before.

She tossed and turned, wriggled vainly to the point the sheets were coming loose and still sleep evaded her. If only she hadn't been warned about all the horrible and embarrassing things that could happen if she wasn't careful around men. Embarrassment that Subaru had constantly been trying to warn her about and avoid... she really could be quite silly sometimes. Why was she worried about someone she trusted so much doing those...unspeakable things to her.

Mind made up, she climbed down to Subaru's makeshift sleeping mat and slid up against him. Screw being embarrassed, she just didn't want to be alone; everything had been just fine doing what they'd done up until now she was absolutely sure it'd still be fine. Taking Subaru's hand in hers she pushed her down against the pillow and shut her eyes.

Stirred by the movement Subaru noticed he wasn't alone anymore, "What's going on?" He groggily asked.

"I don't want to be alone," Emilia stated firmly, unwilling to be dissuaded.

Chuckling gently, Subaru wondered what else he should have expected. Besides, it was nice to be trusted and relied on. Maybe it wasn't proper, but if it made Emilia happy Subaru could learn to live with it. As the two fell into slumber, Emilia once again

wrapped her arms around Subaru unwittingly. The nightly routine had survived the truth of where babies come from.

Floating in the sky a certain gray cat watched onwards as he had the events of the entire night. As much as he'd like to say he'd been busy looking out for threats to his daughter rather than avoiding Lia and the others that would be a lie. Like it or not, word was out that a silver-haired half-elf was living in Elmor forest, and soon he alone would probably not be enough protection. That meant he had a job to do...a job he'd been avoiding: he needed to get Lia ready.

As much as he hated to admit the two brats Lia had made friends with had a point, Lia was growing up. With a life spanning across 400 years it was easy to forget how fast children advance. But tonight's events had been eye-opening, his daughter's body was already entering adulthood. It was time to start believing in her.

At this rate, Puck was certain Melanqua would be here in weeks, and that was not a fight Puck was sure he could win. It was time to truly prepare Lia to protect herself; starting tomorrow he'd have to get her Subaru spirits to contract with and start teaching them in earnest. As much as Puck hated to admit—and he did indeed hate to admit it—if anything happened to him Subaru was the only one he could entrust Lia to. The fact that he cared for her deeply was undeniable for someone who'd prodded around Subaru's mind so much.

On the bright side, at least he didn't have to give his daughter the talk. For tonight's service, he might just have to give his mouthy fellow feline a bit of a break. In her own way she was looking out for Lia, and that was what ultimately mattered in Puck's book—disagreements and all. If only he wasn't looking after three little heroes he might have had more time—but it was too late for that now.

Author's note: Long time no see. Sorry about the delay, life's been a thing. After the long hiatus I felt like I wanted to get the rust off and that spawned my other story. This is a shorter chapter more of just a bridge between this and the next main point. This one was a bit difficult to write, given I'm a guy. It's actually been half written for quite a bit. Still I have to imagine that for a young girl with no idea what's going on...a first period would have to be absolutely terrifying.

I chose to cut back and forth to Subaru's perspective rather than write out a full the birds and bees thing and to avoid cutting too close on some things that might be a bit uncomfortable for some readers, the one giving the sex-ed was a recent rape victim... you can imagine that the warnings might have been a bit...firm. An older Emilia with more walls would have probably avoided Subaru for a bit out of embarrassment. But this younger Emilia is more bothered by the idea of being alone than worrying that the person she trusts the most might do "naughty things" if she's not careful.

We also get a bit of Puck accepting a reality he doesn't like. In a lot of ways Puck embodies some things I see in real-life parents. But the stage is set and Puck will do everything he can to make sure Emilia makes it out of whatever comes her way.

***Chapter 11*: Chapter 11**

Arc II: Shadows of the Past

Chapter 9: The Shadows Cast By Flames

It had been almost a year since Subaru's unexpected arrival; a year in which Emilia's shattered life had been pieced together—at least a tiny bit. Indeed, much of what she had thought she'd never reclaim had found its way back to her. While Geuse and Mother Fortuna were forever lost to her, she'd found a new family of sorts—or at least that's what Subaru and Clarissa insisted they were. While Emilia really didn't think that's how it worked, she liked the sound of it—so she didn't argue. They might be dullards, but they were her dullards and she wouldn't trade them for anything.

Even the village nearby had warmed up to her, after she and Subaru had repelled the bandit attack. In exchange for allowing them to gather pyroxene crystals from the forest under supervision, they had agreed to provide her with food and clothing as needed and to help keep the statues of the forest safe. The village had improved notably with the increased income, and the villagers had grown increasingly friendly to her and Subaru as they prospered. The headman of the village had even discussed moving them into a plot of land on the outskirts of the village—a move that all the three of them were still too wary to take them up on. The pained look on Clarissa's face had been all it took to convince her and Subaru that that was not the right idea.

Still Emilia had friends, almost family, and a community that was no longer terrified of her existence—she just knew she had to be the luckiest girl in the world. The only real thing she had to worry about, she cast her gaze fondly towards her roommate as he continued to slumber away, was Subaru's worrying tendency to overwork himself to the bone. Somehow Puck had got it into his head that he had to grow strong to take care of her—she could take care of herself, thank you very much—and he continued to work himself into the ground day after day trying to get stronger, learning magic, and learning to use the spirit arts. While his physical prowess and magic were still slow going, he had the makings of an excellent practitioner of the spirit arts.

Thinking about spirits Emilia let out a fond sigh— at Puck's urging they had contracted with some lesser spirits—although in this case the "they" ended up quite a bit more literal than anticipated. Whatever had tied her and Subaru's gates together also confused lesser spirits to the point that they were unable to distinguish between the two. Emilia was still just the slightest bit indignant that her naming attempts had been denied—Chunchunmaru was a really good name and no one would convince her otherwise. But Subaru had claimed the naming rights for the six spirits they contracted—she still cursed that goofy smile of his that had taken away her righteous indignation—and thus they were named: Charmander(fire), Squirtle(water), Pidgey(wind), Geodude(earth), Umbreon(yin), and Vega(light). Subaru had grumbled for quite a bit while naming Vega about there not being any "monsters" of that type—Emilia still didn't quite understand what he meant; she also didn't understand why he uttered nonsense like, "Charmander use Ember!" rather than just saying the incantation "Goa" properly.

Still Subaru had gotten really good at working with the spirits. Particularly, Subaru was capable of really impressive stuff when he worked with Umbreon combining his Yin magic with the spirit's. Subaru had managed to add Shamack, Vita, and Murak to his own magical repertoire, but had yet to be able to cast anything of el or higher tier without a spirit's assistance. Working with and learning from Umbreon, Subaru had also managed to truly cast minya properly—it turns out that Puck wasn't the best teacher for Yin magic. According to Subaru a proper minya "is a distortion in time, not a spear of shadows"-whatever that means. Honestly, sometimes Emilia just smiled and nodded when Subaru tried to explain things that gave her a headache. A particularly memorable event had been when Subaru had tried to teach her "math"-Emilia was quite certain that there should not be glyphs when doing math (it's supposed to be about numbers!).

Speaking of said numbskull, he was currently sleeping in for the first time in ages having run himself ragged "working out" yesterday. Emilia was contemplating getting a few nuts for a quick breakfast before curling back into bed, Emilia really didn't get to sleep in enough with how energetic Subaru tended to be in the morning.

Languidly she quietly, yet ever so clumsily, tumbled out of bed, her gaze still bleary with morning grogginess. She languidly stretched her arms over her head as she drowsily ambled about the room. Her nose wrinkled slightly as the odor of burning wood tickled her nose, a once familiar scent. With Puck's help, she and Subaru had taken to using magic to control the temperature in her hut and they hadn't needed to use the fireplace in months. Glancing to a nearby window, the normal morning light shone through quite dimly—almost giving the impression that dawn hadn't completely broken. Still Emilia felt quite refreshed, and she was pretty sure she hadn't woken up *that* early. Her morning breakfast plans were dashed as she glanced out the window, her inspection greeted by dark billowing clouds of smoke that painted the sky in a dark and eerie orange glow.

Startled, Emilia's foggy eyes sharpened and she sprinted out the door. Frantically casting her gaze left and right, an eerie red glow was cast off the snow melting in the distance. The once frozen forest was now on fire. Dumbfounded—Emilia took in the scene blankly for a couple seconds—her eyes unblinking, before her face tightened in realization. If the fire wasn't stopped it might melt and kill all the frozen elves—or even spread into the nearby village! For that matter was Clarissa even awake and able to escape?

"Puck!" Emilia cried, her normal bell-like voice shrill with panic. But several seconds passed with no answer.

"Puck!" "Puck!" "Puck!" Emilia practically sobbed as her cries for help went unheard, her voice beginning to rasp from those calls; as always Puck was away when she needed him most. The pupils of her eyes stretched wide and quavering, she gasped desperately as she set her brain ablaze trying to work out how to stop the fire. If Puck was here, surely he could handle the flames—but Puck wasn't here and she didn't know what she could do to slow down, much less stop the encroaching inferno. A wave of useless thoughts whirled about vainly in Emilia's head, nauseating her as she tried to figure just what she could do by herself.

But Emilia wasn't alone; a trembling hand gently landed on her shoulder. "Calm down, Emi."

While her cries for Puck had not summoned said spirit, they had not gone unheard. They had woken Subaru quite handily.

The nickname that Subaru had recently coined for her echoing in her head, Emilia's breathing steadied ever so slightly—even as her heart tried to burst out of her chest. Turning around to see Subaru's tense expression, however, did not reassure her as she had hoped. Indeed, Subaru himself was staring at the incoming conflagration in what could only be numb shock. Any chance they would have had to hash out a plan was interrupted as a maddened voice called out to the two of them.

"What a beautiful sight to see two so covered in HER love! DESU!" A madman's voice resounded across the forest, so gripping in its intensity that even the flames in the distance faded into the background.

Hesitant yet startled, Subaru and Emilia warily turned around—their cautious eyes assailed as the shouting man's eyes practically bulged out of their sockets with the force of his shout. Standing, or rather twitching in place, before them was a green-haired man, whose skin carried an unhealthy green hue, clawing madly at his face in inexplicable ecstasy.

"Ah, such a dazzling sight! The likeness to Satella is absolutely INCREDIBLE. And to be coated, nay awash, in SUCH LOVE, why you must have started the Ordeal all on your own. DESU!" With a shout so fierce that the edges of his mouth nearly reached

his ears he rejoiced—crying tears of what an onlooker could only presume to be crazed jubilation.

Emilia tensed, no good could come out of anyone who sought her out in the name of the Witch of Envy, even if she hadn't seemed all that bad when she met her. The situation was even worse knowing that she DID have some connection to the witch. Subaru was stricken speechless, trapped between a raging forest fire and a madman.

Tilting his head left to right with such force that Subaru swore he heard the man's spine crack, he then introduced himself.

"My apologies. Despite the beautiful display of DILIGENCE before me I have failed to introduce myself. I am Petelgeuse Romani-Conti, the Sin Archbishop representing Sloth."

Petelgeuse took a deep bow before them. While Subaru merely remained stricken silent by the bizarre behavior of the man before him, Emilia had gone completely rigid and stared ahead blankly.

"Geuse," the name tumbled out weakly, her tone empty and despondent, falling somewhere between confusion and terror.

Noticing Emilia's state, Subaru's eyes hardened. "What do you want with us?" There was a quaver in his voice that betrayed the nervous churning deep in his gut. Something about Petelgeuse's very being unnerved some part of Subaru deep within.

Petelgeuse cupped his hand and wrapped it around his ear as he leaned towards Subaru. He then gazed straight upon Subaru with bewildered eyes before deafening Subaru with a loud, "What!?"

Subaru's eyes blanked as he stared dumbfounded at the ever chaotic behavior of the man in front of him. Unease writhed about in Subaru's chest, something about Petelgeuse deeply unsettling him.

"How can two people so covered in the witch's LOVE not know of the ordeal, DESU!" Petelgeuse viciously dug his nails deep into his face leaving deep bleeding gashes, enraptured in apparent agony.

"Inconceivable!" The madman clawed once more slinging blood from his gouged face to stain the pristine snow beneath him.

"Ungrateful!" The madman looked as if he were trying to pluck out his own eyes with the viciousness with which he drove his fingers once more from his forehead to his chin.

"Slothful..." at the utterance of that word Petelgeuse seemed to come back to his own crazed senses.

"My apologies. With such abundant love on you, might you be Pride? You have received the gospel, yes?" Petelgeuse's face loosened in a manner that one might call expectant—perhaps even welcoming.

"Gospel?" Subaru asked, half out of sheer confusion—half out of a desire to give Emilia time to snap out of whatever had her trembling next to him.

"You have not received the gospel? How slothful of me to miss the very reason her providence has guided me to you!" Petelgeuse turned and grasped on to the nearest tree before smashing his forehead against the tree. Subaru winced once, twice, and thrice as the dull thuds echoed across the field—the sound pounding like a sharp drumbeat urging onwards the gentle roar of the ever encroaching flames. The biting odor of smoke in the air urged Subaru back to action.

"Squirtle. Charmander. I'm counting on you!" Subaru braced himself, preparing to rely on the two spirits to perform a feat far beyond him. Using a single spirit he could at best

cast an el level magic, and by himself not even that. But working with the two spirits in tandem perhaps this might work, even better the air was absolutely brimming with mana today—he had more power at his disposal now than he'd ever had before.

"UI Huma!" Subaru formed a wall of thick and tall icicles behind him. Hopefully these would stall the flames as they continued to encroach.

"It worked, I can't believe it," Subaru took in his feat wide eyed and breathless.

Indeed in physical ability Subaru was nothing spectacular, in magical ability he was mediocre, but in the use of the spirit arts Subaru had genuine talent. Huma was a spell which could be cast with both fire and water magic, and Subaru had combined the efforts of his spirits—a rare talent.

"Absolutely brilliant! I present to you the gospel—proof of LOVE!" The man tenderly outstretched his hands gently holding—cradling—the book as if it were a newborn infant.

"You will of course receive your own later, but onwards to the ordeal. The Ordeal that the two of you have spectacularly, diligently, unwaveringly started while I slothfully wandered blindly searching for HER vessel." Petelgeuse's unhinged eyes gazed upon Emilia as if she were salvation itself.

"I've had enough, what the hell are you talking about!?" If Petelgeuse was offended by Subaru's rude outburst, it didn't extend to his expression as he smiled widely—both hands raised in the air in apparent worship.

"Why the preparations for that girl to become the vessel for Satella's return, of course. With such a likeness to the witch, she must have been born for that very role. And covered in the Witch's loving miasma as she is, why the possession must have already begun! And soon SHE will embrace this land in her loving, love-filled, forgiving, gratuitous LOVE!"

Tears streaked down Petelgeuse's rapturous face, as a piercing fierceness took hold in Subaru's eyes.

"And what happens to Emilia?"

"She gets the honor to be consumed by Satella's loving shadows," the jealousy on Petelgeuse's face at his frank admission deeply unsettled Subaru.

"So you set fire to the forest to corner us for this?!" Subaru seethed.

"Ah, ah, ah! The one who set fire to the forest was not me, but the one who led me to you. That he got distracted along the way and left me unhindered to conduct the Ordeal uninterrupted is truly slothful." Petelgeuse's voice was deep and heavy as spoke the final word.

Even now Subaru could feel a truly staggering amount of fire element mana in the air, if whatever was emitting it was being obstructed Subaru could only think of one person—or rather— one cat who could do it: Puck. Puck would not be able to help them, and he figured it was safe to assume that whatever had set the forest ablaze was hostile. A year ago, Subaru might have hesitated to escalate to violence, but a year in this harsh world and the bits and pieces of the horrors that Clarissa had shared with him had taught him something—he wasn't strong enough to save everyone; he would have to settle for protecting those important to him, and he would die before letting this madman lay a single hand on Emilia.

"El Minya!" Subaru called upon Umbreon's assistance and launched a barrage of shadowy spears.

"Murak!" Subaru grabbed Emilia over his shoulder and jumped 30 meters in the air with her where they gently swayed, like a leaf in the breeze. As they took flight, something invisible effortlessly swatted aside Subaru's El Minya.

"Geuse! What happened to you, don't you remember me and Mother Fortuna?" Emilia cried at the top of her lungs, her amethyst eyes glistening with freshly shed tears.

"That name. I've never heard that name in my life, and yet my brain trembles!" Petelgeuse cradled his head in his arms as his body viciously jerked back and forth.

"The two of you loved each other, there's no way that you've forgotten!" Hearing Emilia's appeal Petelgeuse shouted in anger and with his right hand grasped a bunch of hair and viciously tugged it free from his scalp, roots and all. Emilia's eyes winced shut at the brutality of the self mutilation.

"All these years I have loved one and only one person, I am not so slothful as to be led astray by the words of a mere vessel," Petelgeuse shouted, for the first time appearing to be in a genuine rage.

Unable to reach him, her eyes fluttered shut pushing away unshed tears—the memory of Mother Fortuna being skewered through the chest by something invisible ran through her mind. If she couldn't get through to Geuse, then she couldn't let the same fate befall Subaru. She'd had a year to come to terms with her memories, and the Geuse she loved had been lost long ago. Emilia had made a vow to herself: she would not lose anyone again.

Opening her eyes, and shaking off her hesitation she incanted, "UI Huma!"

Dozens of Ice pillars each the size of carriage formed behind her and glistened in the eerie orange glow lighting the sky. They rained down with thunderous impacts launching powdery snow about in a white mist. Flipping off Subaru's shoulder she turned her gaze towards the destruction. Incompetence and naivety had cost her everything once—had left whatever was left of Geuse in this horrid state—she would not forgive herself even the slightest lapse.

Noticing the mist of snow being parted by some sort of invisible appendage, Emilia summoned a warhammer of ice in her hands and leapt in front of Subaru as she swung. Ever quick on the uptake, Subaru realized that her swing would be useless under the influence of Murak.

"Vita!" Subaru cried out, his hand outstretched. Gravity took hold with a vengeance as the glacial warhammer struck from above with all the force afforded by an object weighing several tons. Not only was the invisible projectile assailing the pair knocked off track, but as Emilia released the hammer it struck the ground hard enough that every tree within a few hundred meters was rattled back and forth by the ensuing earthquake.

Emilia, albeit to a lesser degree, was also affected by vita. Restored to her normal weight she began to freefall. There was not even a trace of panic in her eyes, however. A trail of ice began to be conjured beneath her feet as she skated about in the sky. Her long, silver hair fluttering behind her as she leveled her icy path, and with her fall arrested she leapt back up to hoist Subaru on her shoulder much like a sack of potatoes.

Subaru in tow, Emilia once more began conjuring an icy path beneath her and began a steep descent toward the ground. As they plummeted downwards Subaru forced his eyes wide open, despite the freezing gale stinging them. His vigilance was quickly validated as once more, some invisible appendage could be made amidst the plume of snow that had been launched.

"Straight hole!" Subaru called out one of his original magics, inspired by one of Doraemon's gadgets. A shadowy distortion opened up in front of whatever was incoming and consumed it. An instant later a second such portal opened up in front of where Petelgeuse had been and spewed forth the arm it had previously engulfed.

A subtle, silent murak helped arrest their descent as Emilia leveled out the path of ice beneath her to the ground. Crunching the snow beneath them as they came to an

abrupt halt, the pair kept a wary eye on their enemy as Subaru gracelessly flopped out of Emilia's fireman's carry to stand on his own two feet.

As the mist of powdery snow cleared, Petelgeuse was unscathed; in fact, a solid circle around him was completely untouched. Uncaringly Petelgeuse leisurely stretched. Warily watching the out-of-place movement Subaru noticed that Petelgeuse wasn't actually completely unscathed, an impression of a fist gracing his right cheek.

"To be so uncaring as to hit myself with the gift bestowed upon me by her—to so wastefully use the proof of her love—is truly slothful. Still all of that useless effort, desperate actions, and violent undertakings—and to still leave your opponent untouched, that goes beyond the limits of sloth." Petelgeuse's voice was deep, neither hinting at anger nor indifference—yet there was a startling lucidity that had been absent in his mad ramblings until now.

"And yet, your incompetence will be the death of everyone in this forest!" Petelgeuse's eyes widened—as he trembled violently—his voice crescendoing from a sotto voce to a maddened, anguished screech—a cry of intense grief.

"Completely useless, dabbling with love that you should never touch!" Petelgeuse chomped viciously on his finger as blood ran down his chin.

"Dooming each other as you fight a battle you can't hope to win!" Once more he gnawed at his fingers, with such violence that Subaru was convinced that he would bite one off.

"To dare so much—yet to do nothing, is truly slothful. My brain is trembling." Petelgeuse wailed to the heavens, both palms laid flat across the side of his face as he writhed obscenely.

Subaru silently quivered at the sight before him. How could they fight when they couldn't even see what was being used against them? As thoughts of fleeing desperately came to mind, time came to a halt as shadows boiled upwards from the ground. A shadowy hand gently placed itself on his shoulder.

A bell-like voice rang sadly, "I believe in you."

A gentle push on his shoulders nudged him forward as he began melting back into the flow of time. As he glimpsed behind him he saw a vestige of a silver-haired purple-eyed woman gazing down on him fondly. And much like when he contracted a spirit, he felt as if another presence was standing with him even as she faded.

Subaru closed his eyes and took a deep breath as the world around him resumed. For the first time since the madman approached them Subaru saw—he saw shadowy arms dangling around Petelgeuse menacingly. But he could see them, therefore he could fight. That woman whose presence was still with him—she had looked startlingly like Emilia who was said to resemble the Witch of Envy. And now Subaru could see through the power of the Witch Cultist before him. If the spirit of the Witch really was here, Subaru guessed that she was on their side.

"Emi can yo-" Subaru never finished his sentence.

"I can." Emilia answered suddenly, an unexpected severity in her response.

Indeed, Emilia's normally wide, bright eyes were narrowed and focused. She was after all seeing what had killed Mother Fortuna and taken Geuse from her for the first time. The shadowy hands that drifted about slothfully were eerily disconcerting and alien. Emilia had the odd yet distinct impression that they were things that were contrary to the very world itself. If a divine blessing was given by the world, then what was before had to be the very antithesis of a blessing.

She would no longer think of the thing before her as Geuse, whatever stood before her was birthed by those eldritch appendages sprouting from him. It was a product of her

sins—of her indecisiveness. Had she given the key to Pandora, perhaps all of this might not have happened. Had she properly fled the forest and not distracted Mother Fortuna, perhaps all of this might not have happened. Had she stayed in the Princess Room as she promised, perhaps all of this might not have happened. Even her decision to declare the man before her to not be Geuse was born of her selfishness and weak-heart. She was afraid to watch someone she had loved reduced to this. She was afraid of anyone taking away the companions she had found.

Emilia was afraid of being alone again. She gluttonously consumed every happy moment with Subaru. She greedily drank in all the moments that Subaru never strayed from her side, always remaining her Subaru. She wrathfully struck down whatever tried to take away the family she'd found. She was unbearably proud of how amazing everyone around her was. She lusted for their kind intentions and adoration. She envied everyone who could live without the world trying to take away their little bit of happiness. But Emilia wasn't slothful. Geuse wasn't slothful. She wouldn't let either of them be tarnished by the embodiment of sloth. Emilia was sure that she might be the most sin-laden girl in the world—but if nothing else she would be diligent. She formed a sword in her hand and gripped it so firmly the magically strengthened ice groaned as if the strain would shatter it.

Suddenly a sword of ice formed in Subaru's palm. Startled, he grasped on to it. Whatever was going on, Emilia was taking it very seriously. Subaru knew better than to second guess her judgment. If she was giving him a sword, then she intended for the two of them to close in and try to end this quickly.

Thus they charged inwards. With Umbreon's assistance Subaru continuously used *murak* and *vita* to strengthen his sword swings and reduce the burden of wielding a longsword such that he was effortlessly using it with his right hand alone. With effort Subaru was able to bat aside most of the deluge of unseen hands rushing towards him. Those that he couldn't bat aside he sent back using *Straight Hole*.

The ease with which his yin magic responded was strange though...it was almost as if he were playing a game with aim assist on. Something or someone, definitely not Umbreon, was helping shape and aim his magic. With such skill that he shivered to think that someone so talented could exist. In what little he'd squeezed out of Puck about the Witch of Envy, he'd gathered that she was an incredibly powerful yin magic user. Did this truly mean the witch was with them and on their side? Or was she in league with the Witch Cult and trying to take Emilia's body?

Subaru shook the thought off and looked over to Emilia. She had yet to even lift her sword as pillars of ice wordlessly warded off the assailing hands effortlessly. Her eyes were hard in a way Subaru had never quite seen. As innocent and angelic as she was, Emilia did have her moments where she was seriously scary; however, this was the first time Subaru had seen Emilia willingly and knowingly use her power in such a fashion.

As the ferocity of the incoming hands increased Subaru wracked his mind for ideas. He could call on Geodude and use *Dona*, perhaps. But that would block his sight and stop his approach. The longer they stayed away the worse this would get. Pidgey's wind spells would lack the stopping power to divert the hands...and he really wasn't very good at working with Vega yet; yang spells were so much harder than yin spells for him, even with the spirits assistance. A sudden, gentle urging welled up in his chest. There was something he could do—it wasn't something he could do on his own yet, but he wasn't alone.

"*Kamui*" and with that incantation for a brief moment Subaru went intangible. Subaru was grateful for the large amounts of excess mana Emilia was pumping in the air that let him use the spell—the only way they'd truly found to make use of Emilia's amazing mana capacity. Emilia possessed mana far in excess of what she could controllably output into a spell. But Emilia and Subaru were both excellent at the Spirit Arts, if she gradually expelled it into the air around them then they could use it to perform spells far beyond what they could cast through their gate.

That brief moment was enough, in the fraction of a second where the concept of Subaru's physical form had been separated from the world he had closed the distance between him and the crazed man. Sword raised, Subaru easily removed Petelgeuse's head from his torso. Frozen in a look of shock the head tumbled into the snow as the madman's body collapsed limply.

Subaru collapsed to the ground gasping for air. There was a cost for casting a spell beyond his capabilities, even with all the mana he borrowed he'd been unable to bring the spell forth properly. Whatever had been assisting him had saved the spell, but had done so using his mana alone; well over half of his mana had been used in a single instant. The exertion of what may as well have been a half-marathon was brought upon Subaru in but a second.

In what seemed a second, Emilia's familiar presence took a seat behind him, and pulled him upright to rest leaning against her. He sat in near silence near her catching his breath. As his trembling limbs steadied he noticed something troubling—Emilia was shaking. Shifting away from her to make room to turn around, he caught a glimpse of her absolutely tear covered face. Her eyes were squeezed tight as her entire body shook with silent sobs.

"Emilia, are you okay?" Subaru kept his voice low and calm.

Emilia's trembling arm reached out to Subaru's sleeve and she grasped on desperately as she shook her head. Subaru pulled Emilia's head to his chest as he cradled her in a hug. Normally, desiring to deal with her problems on her own (much like Subaru), this time she clung to him desperately. Subaru gently stroked her hair waiting for her to calm down.

"D-do you remember when I told you about Mother Fortuna and Geuse?" Emilia eventually croaked out, her voice muffled as she buried her head into Subaru.

"Mhmm," Subaru gently acknowledged his chin against her head.

"He...he," Emilia stuttered, unable to get the words out, but Subaru was able to connect the dots.

Instantly Subaru felt sick, the man he had just decapitated was the same man that Emilia had looked up to as almost family in the past. Incoherent noises danced in Subaru's mouth as he tried to find the right words to apologize. If he'd known then surely there would have been another way to end this.

"Don't apologize!" A bit of force entered Emilia's weak voice, as her Mother Emilia persona came forth.

She finally raised her head and stern, tear-glazed eyes met his. "There wasn't anything else that could have been done. That...that man he was no longer my Geuse."

"It just...it just hurts. Even if he killed Mother Fortuna—even if he tried to kill us, it still hurts." Emilia's voice was whisper faint.

The sound of a burning branch falling to the ground shook Subaru from the moment.

"I know. I won't say I understand, but we've still got stuff to do." Subaru urged gently as he, however wobbly, stood up once again on tired legs.

Emilia's eyes went where Subaru was gazing, and once more took notice of the encroaching forest fire. Clapping both of her cheeks with her hands Emilia stood up. There would be time to mourn later—right now she needed to keep the elves in the forest from being among the mourned. Emilia took Subaru's outstretched hands and stood up once more.

Not more than a moment after Emilia let go of Subaru's hand, a shadowy arm raced out of the nearby trees and proceeded to rapidly pull Subaru away.

Screaming out his name in concern, Emilia sprinted frantically after Subaru. The chase would not last long before she arrived to find a cloaked figure with shadowy hands protruding from behind him, holding Subaru with the threat to remove his head at a moments notice.

Emilia paused out of caution seeing Subaru held hostage. Uncharacteristic rage welled up in Emilia's chest, whenever someone came after it was always her loved ones that got hurt, not her. If she had just been able to hold herself together, then this might not have happened.

"Welcome! Welcome!" The cloaked figure bowed courteously as he greeted Emilia in a voice she should have never heard again.

"Let Subaru go right now!" Emilia's normally bell-like voice was icy and dripping with venom.

"Regrettably I cannot do that, if the two of you are so dead set in avoiding your duty in completing the Ordeal then I will need to provide some incentive," the voice was calm as if possessing genuine regret over causing a minor disagreement.

"DESU!" Or so the man had seemed until he shouted violently, his hooded head twitching sharply underneath the covering.

"Just...who are you?" Emilia asked cautiously whilst racking her brain over just what she should do.

"How slothful not to commit your acquaintances' names to memory. I am Petelgeuse Romani-Conti, Archbishop of Sloth." The presumptive Petelgeuse seemed genuinely confused at how someone who had been killed minutes ago, now inhabiting a different body could be misidentified.

"I was so very confused, flummoxed, bewildered, and angry when the two of you saw my Unseen Hands. But then it occurred to me, it must be happening as Satella's soul encroaches ever more on you. Indeed the Ordeal is at hand and I must chastise your sloth and encourage you to finish your task."

His piece said one of the unseen hands languidly drifted towards Subaru's left pinky and pulled it back so forcefully that with a sudden crunch it was bent in a ninety-degree angle in the opposite direction of which a hand would normally close. Eyes-wide Subaru screamed in agony at the forceful dislocation and snapping of his metacarpals.

"STOP!" Emilia raged, still too afraid to intervene and risk Subaru being killed.

"Ah, ah," Petelgeuse wagged his index finger, "another outburst and you will break another of his fingers."

"All you need to do is accept her love, and all of this will end."

"I...I don't know how to do that..." Emilia's voice quivered in panic.

"I see my loyal finger will have to bring in the other one," Petelgeuse clapped his hands after the ominous declaration.

"Clarissa," Emilia cried out as the cat-eared woman was yanked into the clearing.

Clarissa's arms were bound behind her with rope and the witch cultist who had abducted her yanked her about by her hair.

"Let me go," Clarissa shouted as she tried to resist. But before long she was placed next to Subaru, within reach of Petelgeuse's fiendish hands.

"The boy is coated in such thick love, that perhaps he is needed for the Ordeal. But that is not the case for this girl. Should Satella be reborn, perhaps she might receive her

mercy and love." Petelgeuse's voice was deep and heavy, but such lucidity was quickly lost once again to madness.

"Ah, I can see you're wanting to ask. How did we know? Bestowed with HER loving guidance I caught wind of Melakuera seeking a silver haired half-elf witch in the forest. The people in the village were so tight-lipped at first. A tiny demonstration of HER will, however, and they were quite forthcoming." The presumptive Petelgeuse clawed through his hood and began to rip the now blood-stained cloth loose as he shredded the flesh underneath.

"They told us of the boy you lived with and the catgirl that you were close with. The Gospel said you might be resistant to HER love at first, but mentioned that your heart could be swayed through others. So I sent my fingers to gather her as we had our first talk."

"The villagers," Subaru groaned out, ignoring the pain in his hand, "what did you do to them?"

"Sadly I was too slothful to arrive sooner, the Ordeal must be completed before Melakuera can meddle. As I was not able to carry out a proper offering. Such an undertaking has been postponed" Petelgeuse turned to bash his head against the nearest tree, and on the first impact the shredded remains of his hood were ripped off as the crazed man violently twisted his head against the tree before sliding it off with such force that the bark itself was ripped off the tree.

Such was a moment that Subaru would not—could not—overlook, ignoring the pain from his mangled finger Subaru took a deep breath. Wordlessly he called on Pidgey and sharply exhaled as a silent Fula formed a blade of wind. The blade raced towards Petelgeuse unerringly.

"UI Dona," Only to be blocked as Petelgeuse used magic for the first time to summon a shield of earth.

The hands wrapped around Subaru tightened their grasp, as the madman turned around to face him. The face that greeted him, however, was not Petelgeuse. It was a nondescript, freshly mauled, middle-aged face—the face of a man he had never seen before.

"Dangerous, how dangerous and violent. I am trying to share just a bit of the love I've been bestowed, and yet you keep trying so hard. It was slothful of me to assume that you would be unable to try more magic after your stunt. Yet, there is such an easy solution." Petelgeuse's voice carried the most bizarre mixture of parental consternation and embarrassment.

The man who claimed to be Petelgeuse walked up to Emilia who had collapsed into a trembling mess on the ground as two unseen hands took place on each side of Subaru's jaw. Reaching down to Emilia's head and pointing it at Subaru and then he spoke.

"You should look at what you're doing."

Emilia tensed ready to lash out but, "Careful, one wrong move and you'll kill them both."

The hands on each side of Subaru's jaw started pushing in. Harder and harder they pushed as the bones beneath began to creak. The force coming down closed Subaru's mouth so completely that his anguished screams were nought but murmurs. With a crunch and an unintelligible noise from Subaru the first bones began to snap.

"Stop! Please stop!" Emilia cried, desperately yanking her head back and forth trying to look away.

"Do not look away! You did this! Your inaction caused this! If you loved him you would finally embrace HER LOVE and end his suffering." Petelgeuse's voice thundered as

forcefully as it could in Emilia's ears, as he forced her to watch. The moment her eyes clenched shut he used his fingers to pry her eyelids back open.

Even as the bones in the jaw shattered, the hands did not stop. They continued pushing inwards such that Subaru's teeth were shoved out of his gums and began to punch holes through Subaru's cheeks as the sides of his face were further compressed. The agonized gurgles that somehow escaped Subaru's mangled jaw danced about torturously in Emilia's head, incessantly. The lower half of Subaru's face pulverized completely, the hands let up and Petelgeuse let go of the glass-eyed Emilia who collapsed bonelessly and wailed. Sobbing incoherently Emilia rocked back and forth.

"Now you feign madness! How unsightly. How slothful." Petelgeuse spat in disgust as he marched towards Clarissa who continued to watch on in mute horror.

A violent snap and an unseen hand dislocated Clarissa's right knee and twisted it until the very joint was reversed. As the girl who was like an older sister to her howled, Emilia flinched violently.

"See, if you were truly mad you would pay no heed as I tortured your friends. You're not mad; you are a slothful coward. Too afraid to face that the people you love are being mauled by YOUR HANDS! Too slothful to repay their love properly, you play at madness." Petelgeuse continued to rant—his own gaze distant, unfocused, and empty.

Emilia trembled and shook her head. Her thoughts were a racing whirlpool of emptiness. No matter how desperately she gasped, the sensation that she was suffocating would not leave.

"If you truly LOVED them, you would push yourself endlessly for them, sacrifice everything you are, rather than laze about as a poorly played mad woman."

"Shut up," Clarissa rasped out, "I can't see a scrap of love left in you."

Enraged, Petelgeuse stomped up to Clarissa. And put his gaze directly across from her, as their stairs met eye to eye. Her gaze was judging and vengeful.

"You dare question my love for HER?" Petelgeuse roughly brought Clarissa's face even closer to his as manhandled her by her hair, the rest of her body still restrained by Petelgeuse's unseen hands.

"The one thing you can't hide from me is who you truly are. You're obsessed, and someone deep down you're grieving...but looking at your soul there is no one in your right now that you love."

Clarissa's voice was practically a hiss as she glared down Petelgeuse, her eyes more akin to a cat staring down a mouse despite her position. The more she provoked him the loser the unseen hands got. The man's volatile mood was a weakness and she would not waste it. Ever so carefully, she covered her claw-like nails with a sharp blade of water-magic enhanced ice.

"Those two, however, they've got plenty of kindness and love in them. I won't watch that get ruined by some lunatic who preaches about love when he doesn't have a drop of it in his soul."

Forgetting all about his authority Petelgeuse reached out in rage, and that was her chance. Finally breaking an arm free she slashed out viciously, cleanly ripping open the side of Petelgeuse's neck completely severing all the way through the carotid artery. Not wasting a moment her clawed hand thrust once more racing through the throat and piercing Petelgeuse's esophagus and windpipe.

Petelgeuse collapsed in short order, unable to even reach a hand up to his hemorrhaging neck. The sudden loss of blood flow to the brain in a standing position, being enough to render him unconscious in seconds. The unseen hands binding

Clarissa dropped her suddenly as she landed on her three functioning limbs with feline grace. She bit down an agonized scream, as her mangled limb crashed into the ground. She fought through it and took assessment of the situation.

Emilia continued to tremble and gaze onwards blankly, physically fine but traumatized. As much as she wanted to shake her out of the glassy-eyed emptiness gripping Emilia, Subaru's

Physical trauma took priority. As she prepared to embark on a painful one legged crawl, a voice that she should not be hearing cried out.

"Ah. My brain trembles." The witch cultist that had drug Clarissa into the clearing was cradling his head while shouting madly in Petelgeuse's voice.

Before she could begin to work through what was happening the invisible force that had bound her previously, grasped onto her once more and held her rigid. The man now shouting in that detestable voice angrily prowled towards her.

"These sinful eyes that judge my love. I will remove them for you so that you may be receptive to HER love." The darkness and depth of Petelgeuse's threat, carried much more menace than his mad raving ever could.

And viciously he thrust his right hand forward and forced all four fingers and his thumb into the orbital socket. Grasping around the eyeball he pulled suddenly, viciously removing the eye and severing the optic nerve holding on to it as it reached its maximum length and was left to dangle in the bloodied socket. The eye that had seen right through him in his palms, Petelgeuse viciously crushed it, spraying the two of them in a gore of blood and vitreous and aqueous humor.

Clarissa wailed at the inexplicable agony of having an eye viciously ripped from its socket. Once more Emilia shook, but failed to vocalize any response. Subaru desperately ran towards Clarissa before he too was once more bound by Petelgeuse's invisible hands. The only sound other than Clarissa's anguished sobs was Petelgeuse's maddened laughter. Subaru was absolutely certain there was no sound he'd ever hated more.

Laughing in sadistic merriment, Petelgeuse thrust an unseen hand straight through Clarissa's chest and ripped out her still beating heart. It was at this moment that a stabbing cold raised through the forest as the permafrost itself froze once more. Ice flowers bloomed profusely as Emilia's mana raged. They began to bloom on Petelgeuse as well. Attempting to shock Emilia out of it, his unseen hands started violently slamming Subaru into several trees. But in short order, Emilia's icy rampage had frozen him completely. Emilia's uncontrolled magic raced outwards and only two beings were spared its wrath: Subaru and Clarissa were left untouched.

Shakily Emilia hurried and grabbed Subaru and carefully placed him next to Clarissa. Desperately she began to attempt to heal the two of them with healing magic. Clarissa had no heart left in her chest, and no healing magic would ever reanimate her; still Emilia kept trying. Subaru's internal organs had been mangled beyond repair when his body had been slammed into several trees with unimaginable force, internal hemorrhaging and organ failure would soon claim him; still Emilia kept trying.

Only single minded desperation functioned in Emilia's mind. The fact that Clarissa had long since gone cold went unnoticed. The steady weakening of Subaru's heartbeat went unheeded by Emilia's sharp ears. For an hour straight Emilia healed vainly.

It was only when Emilia found herself wiping some snow off of Subaru's forehead that she realized Subaru was startlingly cold—his heartbeat so faint she could barely make it out. Clenching her eyes shut Emilia shook her head.

"No," she whimpered.

"No," she pleaded.

The thought of a world without Subaru was painful. The thought of being alone again was painful. If this was her fate from now on then perhaps...

"Ice flowers blooming. Silver-haired half-elf. Witch. I, Melaquera, commence arbitration. Thou of cursed lineage, how plead thou?" A deep voice echoes.

A giant horse of flames stared down at Emilia as she numbly gazed upwards. Slowly she wrapped Subaru's arms around her as she wrapped him in a hug. She couldn't leave Subaru behind, and running with him was impossible. Lost and with no one left Emilia only saw one option left.

"Please, just kill me," Emilia's quiet voice begged.

She didn't have the strength to lose everything again. If her fate was to forever be alone and hurt everyone close to her, then death was preferable.

"Petition heard. Commencing arbitration."

Shortly after a rush of flames bore down on Emilia and Subaru. After much suffering Subaru was finally released from the mortal coil, and was able to return by death.

Author's Note: This really was meant to be out much sooner. I kept changing my mind about future plot direction along with job hunting and grad school and all that. I swear I rewrote some parts of this about 5 or 6 times and I'm still not happy with it. Petelgeuse is...hard to write. Honestly this whole chapter is painful to write. It's sad to realize the rough outline of this arc has sat for over a year and I'm just now getting it to paper.

In the initial conception of this Emilia struggled much harder to come to terms with fighting Geuse, but some recent real life experience with some family betrayals kind of changed my perception about this. This Emilia has had a year to process that Geuse had some hand in Fortuna's death and walked away from her laughing as she encased herself in ice. Not that she's really processed it, she has categorized it as that's not my Geuse. It's weird but you really can bring yourself to be quite cold with someone you used to love, even if it hurts you inside to be that way. Much like Emilia and Subaru, I am a big softy and bleeding heart; I feel like much myself Emilia would focus on protecting what she has to protect in the now, rather than dwelling in a past that will never come back.

The consequences of all these minor changes piling up now start to come forth. Melaquera was delayed by false harings by Puck for quite a while, but rumors of the kind Silver-haired half-elf witch in the forest brought him and the witch cult running. We now have a trifecta of dilemmas: Geuse, Melaquera, and the forest fire started during Puck and Melaquera's fight. Keep in mind that Emilia and Subaru don't really know much about RbD (if it exists, how it works) so from Emilia's perspective this was very much losing everything she got back.

I also debated whether some of the stuff in the beginning of the chapter should be interludes and side stories, but I decided to get the show on the road. We can always come back to it later much in the way Subaru's training in the whip and such was covered. The acquisition of the lesser spirits themselves also just doesn't seem like it'd be that interesting; it'd mostly be a short story about Emilia and Subaru arguing over naming rights. Which Subaru would win and proceed to name all the spirits but one after pokemon.

We also introduced some original magic from Subaru. As you may have noticed he is taking inspiration from Anime he has watched, because what else would a 12 year old boy with magic do? The two techniques debuting took their names from Doraemon and Naruto.

I also agonized over what to do with Petelgeuse's speech quirk. I decided to include a couple untranslated Desu and cut it down a bit. There's no good way to take it to English and actually present it as a consistent verbal tick that I can think of. There was a fan-theory I heard about Petelgeuse's dialogue that I decided to roll with, because I

think it makes for a more interesting character and story arc. It'll be interesting to see if anyone catches on to it! I also decided to make the way Petelgeuse speaks of Satella as religious in nature (using HER and SHE) as reverential capitalization.

As for Satella's line. In the novels she repeatedly calls out aishiteru to Subaru (which means a VERY STRONG version of I love you), here this has become I believe in you (which if I were to use my paltry Japanese I would probably be writing as shinjiteru) but this represents an important departure, and I hope food for thought and what's going on.

I intend to get the next chapter out fairly quickly. I can't commit too firmly, but for now let's set a target of by or before October 10th. I'm going to try and set a 2-3 week cadence now that I've more or less settled on a plan for this arc. I debated doing a 2 chapter launch of the arc, but writing this chapter was exhausting.

One question I do have of my audience is I realize there are a lot of non-native English speakers in the re: zero fanfic community, are chapters of this length burdensome? I read the WN in Japanese as it comes out, but some of Tappei's longer chapters are just exhausting to get through (so much vocab/kanji I'm not very familiar with).